
Madame by Antoni Libera translated from the Polish by Agnieszka Kolakowska (2000), 440 pages.



This is a first novel by the well known critic, translator, and stage director. Published in Poland to great acclaim, it is now available in English. A prominent reviewer at The Washington Post compared Libera to Stendhal, and The New York Times called the book "inherently powerful and dramatic." Essentially, it is a semi autobiographical account of the last high school year in the writer's life. He chooses not to tell anything about his own family or give his own name. In 1967, he is attending an experimental school in Warsaw, which is preparing all instruction to be offered in French. The new principal is a lady, referred to only as Madame, who also teaches the French classes.

She is a beautiful, regal woman, but aloof and unapproachable on a personal basis. The entire senior class has a crush on her, including the protagonist, but he perceives his own feelings as more exalted, romantic, and sensitive. The principal's elegant moves are monitored; her dresses are closely scrutinized; her pronouncements are treasured.. To learn more about her, he manages to gather a considerable amount of information, often with the help of cleverly discreet interviews. Some of her background is heart breaking, some less than flattering, all of it fascinating.

He is less successful in his attempt to break down her posture of distance, and these efforts to make a true personal connection form the plot line. At the graduation prom, a miracle occurs as Madame asks him to dance with her and allows him to escort her home. Leaving her at the door, he only carries with him an inscribed memento and a fond memory of receiving the only A+ in the entire school. Soon Madame leaves Warsaw.

Between all these events he spends most of his time analyzing his feelings, usually couched in language relevant to literature. Allusions and citations are made, related to luminaries on this field such as Sophocles, Shakespeare, Moliere, Thomas Mann, and Beckett. However, these references emanating from an eighteen year old put a strain on credibility. It would seem that the author, writing the novel years later, projects his own formidable erudition onto the protagonist. Never mind! The agonies and torments of first love are plausible enough.

The richness of the narrator's life, both intellectual and emotional, stands in sharp contrast to the deprivation and drabness of real life in Communist Poland of that time. The barrage of political propaganda, the indignities inflicted by a petty yet onerous bureaucracy, the degradation of educational institutions result in cynicism, suspicion, distrust, intrigue and demoralization among citizens. We witness the author "settling the score." as it were, for his bitterness is evident and vivid when he writes this novel in 1983. Of course, it could not be published before the 1990s.

The translation is excellent, considering that the original is full of idiomatic expressions and colloquial turns of phrase. The wit and satire are finely preserved. Our Library has copies in both languages. One only wishes that the English version were a bit more reader friendly by giving translations of the numerous French sentences, as not all readers know French.

George Suboczewski