



THE LITERATURE EXPRESS

SETTING: post-war Georgia, 2008; a cross-European train laden with writers; different European cities.

THEMES: writership; relationships; national identity.

GENRE: realism; social satire.

ADAPTATION: feature film.

SHORT SYNOPSIS:

Mediocre writers from countries are invited to take a cross-European tour by train. The novel describes the self-preoccupation of the authors and their inability to communicate with each other. The narrator reflects on literature and unsuccessful writers. The main character is a Georgian writer, Zaza. At the heart of the novel is his unsuccessful pursuit of his Polish translator's wife. The Literature Express is about literature and writers, but subtly also tells the sad story of a Georgian man's failure to integrate into European society.

MOVIE REFERENCES:

L'Auberge Espagnole (2002) a film by Cédric Klapisch
Barton Fink (1991) a film by the Coen brothers.



CHARACTERS:

Zaza – the narrator, a self-deprecating Georgian writer on a European literary tour

Elene – Zaza's ex-girlfriend

Iliko – a Georgian student hired as a guide for the Georgian authors

Zviad – a poet, the other Georgian author on the train

Helena – Zaza's Greek love interest

Macek – Helena's husband, a literary translator into Polish

Heinz – one of the managers of the Literature Express tour

Rudy – the other manager of the tour

Raul Aldamov – a Chechen writer also on the tour



BOOK SAMPLE

SUMMARY:

Zaza is 28-years-old and a published writer from Georgia. He is invited to join the “Literature Express” – a touring train with a hundred European writers travelling across the continent from Lisbon to Russia, with a final stop in Berlin.

Like authors from other smaller, lesser-known cultures and languages, being able to reach out to larger audiences beyond their country’s borders is crucially important, but hard to achieve. Coming just after the tragic summer of 2008 when Russia invaded Georgia and occupied South Ossetia, Zaza is reluctant to write and ambivalent about making the effort to produce a text on the journey.

The two Georgian authors on the tour, Zaza, and the poet Zviad, are accompanied by Iliko, a Georgian student who provides practical help and interprets for them. Iliko is an ardent critic of Georgian literature which he sees as something very egocentric and “provincial”. This seems to be a theme that unites the authors from the smaller countries, mainly in the post-Soviet space. “I am reading this shit and I’m haunted by the fucking author, with his stubble and empty pockets, reeking of cigarette smoke”, says Iliko.

One good result of the trip is that Zaza stops smoking, but otherwise he remains true to his stereotypical self, and the novel, charged with self-deprecation, never lets the reader forget who and what he is. He finds it hard to connect with the other writers on the trip, even those from Chechnya or other post-Soviet countries. They share common traumas and failings, yet it is hard for them to relate. The other Georgian on the trip, Zviad, hangs out with colleagues more easily. But their gatherings usually involve alcohol as the go-between.

As the story is set in 2008, the continuing tension between tiny Georgia and enormous Russia overshadows the plot. Once the Literature Express reaches the Russian border, the Georgian

authors are denied entry. This shifts Zaza’s attention from literature, as it barely exists without politics.

Like every good story, this one tells of a love affair, but in the style of the novel itself – bitter and self-ironic. Zaza’s girlfriend Elene broke up with him just before he left for the tour. Ironically, on the train he finds himself attracted to the European version of Elene – the Greek Helena (note the allusion to the beautiful Helen of Troy). Their relationship is doomed to fail because Zaza is unable to rise to the occasion in Helena’s eyes or heart. Moreover, she is on the tour with her husband, Macek, who translates Zaza’s texts into Polish. So, the would-be romance is an act of self-sabotage for a Georgian writer seeking a larger European audience.

Zaza is so consumed by a sense of exclusion and alienation that he cannot even enjoy the cities they visit. For example, when they arrive in Madrid he thinks that as he doesn’t enjoy nighttime Tbilisi, there is no point in walking in Madrid at night either. Observations like this place the reader under his uncomfortable skin.

All the small-language authors apparently face the same dilemma. They cannot interest both a local and an international public with the same story. One must be sacrificed to the other.

By the end of the novel Zaza has a moment of enlightenment and decides that the best thing to write about is the crazy literature express journey. He tells Heinz, the manager of the tour, who replies enthusiastically, saying the trip was such a success that all the writers decided to write about it. And there it is: the one thing all these writers do have in common is unoriginality.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Lasha Bugadze writes fiction and is also a playwright and the host of book programmes on Georgian TV. Born in 1977, he lives and works in Tbilisi. His novel *Country* (2017), won the Saba, Ilia State University Award and Litera prizes for best novel of the year in 2018. Lasha’s earlier novel *Literature Express* (2009), published in English translation by Dalkey Archive Press in 2013, cast a playful eye over Georgia’s yearnings to join the EU, and the predicament of writers from small countries with esoteric languages. Lasha won the International BBC Playwriting Competition in 2011 for the play *The Navigator*, and his play *The President Has Come to See You* was performed at London’s Royal Court Theatre in 2013.