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Castle Bran - For Sale

Built in 1377 by the citizens of Brasov to defend the Transylvanian end of a pass to Valahia, a custom-point and the administrative seat of the Bran domains, this rough military stronghold was smoothed into a romantic-looking castle by Queen Marie of Romania (grandniece of Queen Victoria) - once she received it as a gift in 1920 from the municipality of Brasov. Bran is one of the few standing European castles of the 14 century.

Beginning 1960, with Romania opening up for international tourism, the Americans likened it to "Castle Dracula" on account that "it looks very much like the castles of the vampires in the Hollywood movies". Obliginglly, the local craftsmen and vendors filled the shops around with pullovers reading "Transylvania" and "Dracula", with Hong-Kong made screaming witches, with masks "made in Taiwan" etc. To sell "castle Bran" as "castle Dracula" is taken for granted by very many travel agencies, today, in spite of the heroic resistance of the custodians (it is weird to see the castle itself, with no hint on Dracula anywhere, surrounded by a belt of shops pushing Dracula. An island of scholarship in a sea of consumerism).

In May 2006, castle Bran - nationalized in 1948 - was returned to the heirs of the former owner, Queen Marie: to a nephew of the queen, Dominic of Habsburgh (son of the queen's daughter, Princess Ileana, and of Anton Franz Leopold of Habburgh, archduke of Austria and prince of Tuscani).

Dominic of Habsburgh (living in Westchester, New York) did spend summers at Bran till aged 11. He came to sign the ownership papers which stipulated that the castle will continue to be a public museum for the next 3 years. Then Dominic announced that he would sell Castle Bran for US\$ 25 million. How sentimental of him! The call was not left unanswered: the Russian billionaire Roman Abramovici (owner of Chelsea football club) - who had already bought a fortress on Capri and a palace near Moscow (and who wishes to buy castle Waldschloss in the Alps for only \$ 15 million) - said he would look into the matter.

Will the Romanian government - which has the right to buy the castle ahead of anyone else in the next 3 years - employ this right?

Or will Roman Abramovici share castle Bran with Dracula?

Letter from Castel Dracula, Dec. 2006- Jan. 2007.

No new trial in 'Vampire killing'

A Sherburne County District Court judge earlier denied a new trial to Timothy Erickson, who was sentenced to life in prison for killing Donald Gall, 30, on March 22, 1988. On Thursday the Supreme Court affirmed that decision.

The Minnesota Supreme Court upheld a decision to deny a new trial for a man convicted in 1988 in what was called a "vampire killing" near Riverside Park in St. Cloud.

Erickson and three others were accused of participating in the murder after a party that involved alcohol and drugs. Gall was kicked, beaten and stabbed to death. Erickson,

who was 18 at the time, told police he slit Gall's throat and licked the blood off his fingers.

According to court records, Erickson and others talked about forming a vampire cult and discussed making Gall their first victim.

The Supreme Court also affirmed the verdict and sentence in 1989. This time around, he claimed he was denied a fair trial, that the prosecutor and trial judge had committed misconduct, and that his attorneys had provided him ineffective assistance.

AP, 15 Jan.

Romania sinks its teeth into the tourist trade

Romanians have gone Dracula crazy, hoping that the country's association with the fictional vampire will trigger a tourist boom.

Tourism officials have long marketed Dracula to visitors, but EU membership and visa-less travel have seen the cottage industry hit the big time.

Hotels and restaurants across the northern province of Transylvania have slapped Dracula on their walls, shops are jammed with Vampire Wine, while the national car maker even uses vampires to market its latest model.

"Using Dracula like this is a good way to get tourists to visit, and then you hope they will come back in the following years to explore other parts of our country," says company director Patricia Horotan.

However, purists worry that Romania's charms are being swamped by a sea of kitsch.

The epicentre of this boom is Sighisoara, a medieval town wedged into the mountains of central Transylvania. The real-life Dracula was born here in 1431, earning his fame after holding out against a Turkish invasion. His preferred method of dispatching his enemies was to impale them on a sharp wooden spike, earning him the nickname Vlad Tepes - Vlad the Impaler.

But it is the fictional Dracula, created by Bram Stoker in the 19th century, which dominates the place. In the town's medieval square, the yellow-walled villa where Vlad was born is now a restaurant featuring blood-red décor and cocktails named Dracula's Blood and Dracula's Kiss.

Outside, plasterboard models show smiling fanged vampires; nearby shops sell gaudy vampire badges, cloaks and postcards and street artists produce Dracula portraits.

"Without Dracula Sighisoara would not sell at all," says Mitea Codruta, manageress of the imposing 500-year-old Hotel Sighisoara.

At least Sighisoara has a genuine Dracula connection. To the south, the imposing Bran Castle is marketed as 'Dracula's Castle' even though there is no proof Vlad ever stayed there.

Codruta says: "In Bran they have fake coffins and vampire stuff for the tourists, it is really over the top."

But Rupert Wolfe-Murray, the Scottish chief executive of local film production company Productiv, said: "Romania has a lot to offer tourists. The real history of the place is fascinating, but they may blow it by selling Dracula as a tacky product."

Chris Stephen
Scotsman.com News, 7 Jan.

The talented Dr Polidori

Novels that feature writers, especially real writers, as their central characters are a tricky proposition. They can overly rely on the reader's acquaintance with the author's works. They struggle against the essentially undramatic nature of the act of writing. At worst, through mishandled psychology or infelicitous dialogue, they can leave the reader sceptical that the 'character' could ever have produced the literary works attributed to them.

Yet these potential pitfalls hardly seem to deter contemporary writers from raking over authors' ashes for subject matter. Two years ago, Henry James cropped up in one form or another in works by David Lodge, Colm Tóibín, AN Wilson, Emma Tennant and Alan Hollinghurst. Peter Ackroyd's fictional career practically depends on ventriloquism, with variations on Chatterton, Milton, Dan Leno, John Dee and Charles and Mary Lamb.

Considering all these caveats, it's a delight to praise a young writer who has apparently thrown caution to the winds and written a heartbreaking, elegant and intriguing novel with, at its centre, a real author. Benjamin Markovits' *Imposture* more than fulfils the promise he had shown with his previous books, *The Syme Papers* and *Either Side Of Winter*. *Imposture* is a sensitive, superlative fable, a novel both light and deep.

The writer whom Markovits places centre-stage is Dr John Polidori, and it is perfectly acceptable to be thinking "Who he?" at this moment. Polidori does not make it into the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* or *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*. His one published work in his lifetime - a gothic novella called *The Vampyre* - appeared anonymously in the *New Monthly Magazine*. His fame, such as it is, has to do with his friends rather than his pen.

Polidori was born in 1795, the son of an Italian émigré and an English governess, and attended Ampleforth College and Edinburgh University. He was the youngest ever graduate in medicine and wrote his dissertation on sleepwalking. In 1816 he accepted a fateful invitation to become the personal physician to the most notorious poet of the day: Lord Byron.

Polidori travelled with him to Europe (frequently more sick than his supposed patient), and was present at the celebrated dinner party at the Villa Diodati where Byron, Shelley and Mary Godwin told each other ghost stories. Polidori's contribution - *The Vampyre* - was rightly overshadowed by the more famous work to emerge from that gathering - *Frankenstein*.

Byron and Polidori quarrelled, and he eventually returned to England. *The Vampyre* appeared in 1819, and sold well, mostly since the anonymity was thought to be a ruse to conceal Lord Byron's authorship. Ruthven, the vampire in Polidori's story, was certainly intended as Byron (it was the name used by his former lover Lady Caroline Lamb for a thinly disguised Byron in her novel *Glenarvon*). Polidori committed suicide in 1821.

It is no small part of the success of *Imposture* that Markovits makes the failure, rather than the genius, the focus. The plot hinges on an ingenious invented encounter. A bookish and naïve young woman, Eliza, bumps into Polidori, and mistakes him for Lord Byron (they were, in real life, decidedly similar). Half-flattered and half-snubbed, he decides, expediently, not to disillusion her. She compounds this by pretending that she had once danced with him, when in fact Byron had danced with her more attractive older sister. Their resulting *folie à deux* is played out with sad, graceful steps. This is not a comedy of mistaken identities, but a melancholy study in celebrity, authenticity and inferiority. Polidori is a sad amalgam of arrogance and neediness, and although Eliza is a victim, she is hardly saintly. Markovits skilfully rounds her character away from the stereotypical - she wishes to be envied more than she wants to be loved, she is "greedy and finicky at once".

Despite their manifest failings, Markovits manages to elicit the reader's sympathy for Polidori and Eliza. Both have ambitions at odds with their actual abilities, and while acknowledging the delusional nature of their aspirations, Markovits nonetheless evokes the desperate unhappiness of realising you are not even second best.

Markovits writes in a lucid, unobtrusively poetic style. Mostly, he deploys it to dissect with exquisite precision the ambiguous emotional states of his protagonists, and their complex, contradictory feelings. It is equally suited to passages of luminous description: "A three-quarter moon lay awkwardly on its back in the sky, but its brightness suggested the abrupt certainty of a struck gong. He seemed to be waiting for it to go out, as one waits for the ringing to cease. It continued undiminished." Genuine quotations from Byron, Shelley and Polidori are deftly woven into the narrative, along with some extracts from the memoirs of the other great hanger-on to that circle, Edward Trelawny. The *Vampyre* is braided in as well, but without the melodrama one might associate with it. Although Byron has appeared in fiction as an, as it were, flesh and blood vampire in the Anne Rice mould, Markovits looks to the themes rather than the fangs of Polidori's tale. Although Polidori sees Byron as the debauched aristocrat feeding on the living, his own leech-like state is equally clear.

The historical learning is worn so lightly, and integrated so completely, as to be almost imperceptible. It is a kind of silent triumph, like a perfectly executed forgery, that the entire novel could be read as if it were entirely a fiction, and not tethered to actual facts, personalities and events at all.

But Markovits does tip a wink to the reader. There is a self-conscious preface, in the manner of Byron's contemporary Walter Scott, in which "Benjamin Markovits" tells us about an enigmatic old school-teaching colleague who bequeathed him the manuscript of *Imposture*. The teacher was supposedly called Peter Pattieson, and Markovits realises that was the name chosen by Walter Scott to hide his true identity in some of the *Waverley Novels*. Of course, in all this, the great impostor is Markovits himself, assuming the characters of Pattieson, Polidori, Byron and Eliza. His imposture, however, is utterly genuine.

Benjamin Markovits. *Imposture*. Faber & Faber, £10.99.

Stuart Kelly
Scotland on Sunday Sun, 7 Jan.

Boyd to star in Gorbals musical

Billy Boyd, the Glasgow-born actor who shot to fame in *The Lord of the Rings* film, is returning to his roots by appearing in a musical set in the Gorbals, writes Mike Wade.

Boyd, who grew up in Cranhill before making his big break in the fantasy adventure blockbuster, has been working since last summer developing the production *Ghosts of Love* in his home city.

The musical is based on a legend of a vampire, dating back to the 1950s, when local children believed that a creature with metal teeth haunted the Southern Necropolis, the sprawling cemetery on Glasgow's Caledonia Road.

Ghosts of Love has been written and composed by Bryan Tolland, a former member of the 1980s pop band *Del Amitri*. Boyd will appear alongside another Glaswegian actor, Iain Robertson, whose best-known role was as Craig Stevenson in the BBC's supernatural thriller, *Sea of Souls*.

"The story's based on a folk tale. The music is incredible," said Boyd. "The mothers there used to say that there was a vampire in the cemetery, because when the kids didn't come home they knew that's where they were.

"They would tell them there was something there — it's a misunderstanding of two worlds, the supernatural world that we can't get into and our world, which they can't get into. It's about what happens when those two worlds clash."

Next week, along with Boyd and Robertson, Tolland will meet John Tiffany, associate director of National Theatre of Scotland, to discuss its potential backing for the project.

"Billy and I are very excited about this and we'll do cartwheels when it comes off," said Robertson. "It's about time there was a good Scottish musical and this is it."

The Sunday Times, 7 Jan.

Castle Dracula is for suckers

Castle Dracula is for sale. More properly known in Transylvania - today a region of Romania - as Bran Castle, it is being sold by the Habsburg family.

Hoping to "find the best way to preserve the castle in the interest of the family", the Habsburgs want the local Brasov county authorities to buy it for 60 million euros.

Imaginative vampire lovers will be forgiven for conjuring images of coffins in the basement filled with the Count's descendants anxiously awaiting their fate. But there is one little problem: Count Dracula has nothing to do with the castle at all.

Should you go on a Transylvanian vampire hunt and fall prey to touts and unscrupulous tour guides there, you will be taken to Bran, an impressive medieval pile perched high in the Carpathian mountains, replete with crenellations, turrets and secret passages, and looking

Buyers beware: Transylvania's most infamous des res is actually a phoney, writes daniel richler like the set of a Hammer Horror movie, mainly because it has been the set of Hammer Horror movies.

Therein you will be invited to shiver at the thought of mounting the very same stairs that Dracula once climbed, while postcards and souvenirs with a supernatural aura will be pressed upon you. But if you have done your history, you will know you are being had.

Bran Castle was built in 1377 and okay, yes, in 1462 Dracula did make a stopover there. Once, to rest his horses. But wait: which Dracula are we talking about? Not the vampire count, but Vlad Tepes "the Impaler" - who was also, as it happens, known as Dracula.

Related links Newsdesk Other property news: Iraq wants Saddam's French villas back Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian*, which have recklessly and deliberately muddled the genealogies.

Romanian nationalists revere Vlad (right) as the prince, or voivode, who fended off the Turks and who, with the threat of impalements for all, imposed a ferocious discipline over his own fractious nation. (Ivan the Terrible thought him a terrific role model.) For the record: he was not a vampire, nor did he drink the blood of his enemies.

Many Romanians are irritated by the persistence of the confusion. When I asked a Romanian professor about it at a conference in Bucharest marking the centenary of the publication of Bram Stoker's entirely fictional *Dracula*, he retorted irritably, "How would you like it if we called George Washington a werewolf?"

The Romanians have long sought to set the record straight. In 1978 Romanians revere Vlad as the prince who fended off the Turks. He was not a vampire. The Ceausescu government even funded a film presenting the Impaler as, well, cruel, admittedly, but fair; the 15th century, it argued, was a tough time requiring tough measures. It made no mention of vampires at all.

The trouble for Romania really began with Radu Florescu and Raymond McNally's 1973 bestseller, *In Search of Dracula*, which made wild and spurious claims about Vlad's influence on Bram Stoker, indelibly linking the two. In fact, there is no evidence, not even in the author's notes and archives at Philadelphia's Rosenbach Museum, that Stoker was aware of Vlad's stake thing, or of much about Vlad at all; only that 'Dracula' translated as 'Devil'.

First Posted, 13 Jan.