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'The Historian': Stayin' Alive

By HENRY ALFORD

CALL me uncharitable. (And I know you will.) Any time I see a movie that has more than three extreme close-ups of a gold-tipped fountain pen skritchng across a piece of paper -- or any time I read a text that relies heavily on the words "writings" or "scrivenings" -- I know I'm in for a healthy dose of the Romance of the Literary Life, and suddenly I feel irritable and restless and ready to skin a small animal. In part, it's the self-consciousness and fetishism that ticks me off. But mostly it's the inaptness. A gold-tipped fountain pen is to most writers' lives as Monet's haystacks are to piles of dirt.

A similar kind of romanticizing -- but of historians, not writers -- is on display in Elizabeth Kostova's first novel, "The Historian," about an Oxford professor, his advisee and the advisee's daughter, who are all, at different times, in search of Dracula's tomb. I first noticed it when the 16-year-old daughter, sitting in a cafe at a Mediterranean resort, envies the simple lives of some children she spies because she's sure "these creatures were never threatened by the grimness of history." Then there it was again, with the revelation that the daughter's bedtime mantra is a former teacher's comment: "You show extraordinary insight into the nature of historical research, especially for one of your years." And yet again, with the line of dialogue, "Excellent questions, as usual, my young doubter." When, after many other allusions to historians and historicism, Kostova introduced a character whose last name is Hristova, I was tempted to run out to a pharmacy for some antihistomine.

What's unfortunate about this overload is that the book -- which seems to want to do for historians what "Possession" did for literary scholars -- is otherwise the kind of wonderfully paced yarn that would make a suitable companion to a deck chair, a patch of sun and some socklessness. The story starts in Amsterdam in 1972 when the daughter finds in her father's library some letters the professor wrote in the 1930's. The professor, convinced that the 15th-century Wallachian prince Vlad Tepes, or Vlad the Impaler (the inspiration for Bram Stoker's Dracula), is undead, goes to hunt him down. But the professor mysteriously disappears, setting in motion decades' worth of library research and train travel.

Kostova's strong suit is her interweaving of three sources of information -- what the daughter tells us, what her father tells her and what the letters tell her and us. This is a subtle and effective way of creating suspense. Far less subtle, though, is her habit of ending sections or chapters with bombshells of the "And that little boy . . . was Helen Hayes" variety. (My own approximation of same: Little, Brown paid \$2 million for this book.)

I'm no historian, so I'll have to take it on faith that the novel is, as its author claims, the product of 10 years of writing and research; that neither of two Oxford scholars who are investigating Dracula would bother to buy Bram Stoker's novel and would instead take turns borrowing an Oxford library's one copy; that it would take a boat, albeit a medieval one, a week to sail from the Dalmatian coast to Venice; and that anyone who is not wearing tights would ever utter the statement, "Adieu until the morrow." If I'm wrong, I'm wrong. So be it. Bite me.

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