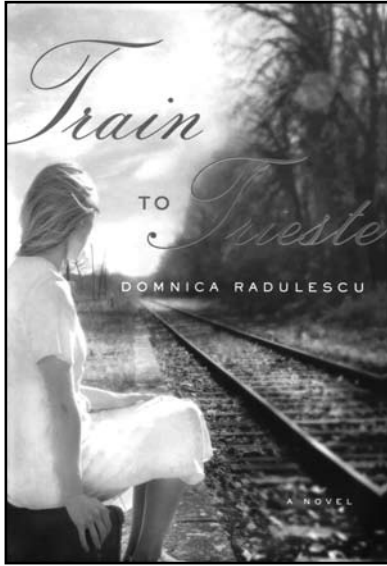


Sarah Kennedy

## DOMNICA RADULESCU

### A Diverse Audience



SK: Can you describe the origins of *Train to Trieste*'s story? Is it largely autobiographical?

DR: The story of *Train to Trieste* bloomed in my mind upon my first return to Romania after sixteen years from my initial escape in 1983. I had left Romania on a plane to Rome and very much wanted for my first return to take place by train, so I could reconnect in a direct way to my native earth. I had the vision of a young girl leaving her country forever on a train going out into the world, with her face stuck on the window pane and watching the landscape of her native country pass in front of her eyes in a rush. At that moment she has the painful

realization of everything that she is leaving behind: her great love, her family, her native language, the familiar places, smells, sounds, sights. It is the gesture that defines her and that defines her destiny forever. After subsequent visits to Romania, gathering family stories, reconsidering my own personal stories, as well as studying and talking to people about the years of the Ceausescu period as well as the post-revolutionary realities, I wrote the first draft of a book called *Notes on the Margins of a Broken Mirror*. But as I developed my narrative, that image of the young girl on the train, as well as childhood stories of people leaving on trains through Yugoslavia and then into Trieste, the first haven of freedom for Romanians, the title *Train to Trieste* came to me.

Yes, of course, it is autobiographical, but it is not a memoir, neither is it my fictionalized autobiography. It's a work of fiction. I gathered in it my personal experiences of growing up and living in Romania under the Communist

dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu, the experience of leaving Romania and diving into the unknown and the challenges of a new life in America. But my experiences and knowledge are sublimated into a work of fiction in which the characters, once created, have taken off and made decisions, taken steps and actions that I have not. In a way, I also projected fantasies of adventure or of the immigrant experience onto my heroine Mona. My escape from Romania was quite a bit less adventurous than that of my character, my beginnings as a political refugee less traumatic and negative than those of Mona. But I tried in my novel to sublimate my own experiences into a story that also reflects the realities of living in those times and the immigrant experience.

SK: Political upheaval makes up a large part of the milieu of the novel. Did you have a “political novel” in mind as you were writing? Revising?

DR: Yes, I started off with the idea of blending love and politics, largely from a life-long fascination both with the diverse ways that history and political upheavals affect, transform, or dislocate personal lives and with the equally diverse and intense ways that people continue to live, love, imagine and create under even the harshest of political conditions. I grew up with stories of World War II and the post-war Soviet occupation, with stories of people being imprisoned, tortured and killed by the Stalinist-type regime in Romania. Yet people continued to have passionate loves and even go to fancy balls. Compared to those periods, my life under the Communist dictatorship was actually an improvement. However, in the first drafts of the novel, the political intrigue was not as suspenseful. I worked very hard on that part of the book and developed it in subsequent drafts in meticulous ways. I blended actual historical realities such as the defection of Ceausescu’s right hand General Pacepa with the lives of my characters and fictionalized the relationship between the two. I intensified aspects of our everyday lives such as the typewriter “hunt” and wove it with the love story and the political intrigue.

SK: What do you think is the function or utility of the political novel in contemporary letters?

DR: I think it is a necessity. Of course, one can't impose topics on writers and artists, but I think political realities, the large movements of history — both of the past and of history as it unfolds during our own lifetimes — constitute a theme that imposes itself with a certain imperiousness on many of today's writers, particularly on those writers who have known first hand traumatic historical and political realities such as dictatorships, oppression, war or exile. The function of the political novel is also that of testimonial to some degree, of preserving and remembering the past with its good and bad, with its beautiful moments and its horrors. I think this necessity has been felt with some acuteness by artists since World War II, which traumatized our world in unprecedented ways. Most importantly, though, the function of the political novel is to do that which history books don't, namely to filter and look at politics and history through the lens of individual experience and personal lives, to show how a woman dresses or what a man eats or what kind of music a couple dances to while secret police actions, censorship, political imprisonments or murders go on outside.

SK: I know that some of your scholarly interests lie in experimental drama. Can you discuss the form of *Train to Trieste* and why you chose a more traditional narrative structure?

DR: *Train to Trieste* combines a more traditional storytelling technique of linear or chronological narrative (with the exception of the flashbacks to the heroine's childhood and the stories of her ancestors) with a non-traditional structure of what I have coined as "epiphanic vignettes," namely short chapters that tell the story in the form of revelatory moments in the lives of the characters or epiphanies which play a crucial role in the unfolding of the narrative but also illuminate the characters' thoughts, feelings and existential choices by connecting them to the world, people and nature around them. In fact, I have also used a theatrical technique of building the story by means of an accumulation of scenes or episodes using the narrative voice — that of the first person present tense — which, like theater or movies, creates a sense of immediacy and urgency.

In terms of style, my editor from Knopf, Robin Desser, noted that my use of recurrent images or phrases like leit-motifs or refrains throughout the story

reminds her of the French poetic form called “villanelle,” in which a line or an image is repeated later in the poem, i.e. novel only in a slightly different context or structure. For my novel this creates, aesthetically, a certain musicality of the narrative structures and, emotionally, the continuity of the heroine’s memories, inner life and imagination, throughout a variety of discontinuous experiences, such as uprooting herself, crossing diverse existential and cultural thresholds. The “orange moons,” the image of Paraschiva floating down the river and the sentence uttered by one of the Italian characters in Trieste, “what’s done is done,” are just a few examples of these “refrains.”

The form of *Train* is a palimpsest of traditional and modern forms, within the overall structure similar to a play or movie with acts or episodes. I have heard people refer to the chapters in my book as “the carnation scene,” “the burning typewriter scene” or “the drugstore scene.” Indeed, I have developed my novel out of scenes that could almost stand by themselves and that have some blank spaces between them that readers must imagine or fill in.

One aspect of the form that has been overlooked or has caused some puzzlement is the difference in narrative rhythm between the first part and the second part. The first half covers roughly three years, while the second roughly twenty. My intention was precisely to dilate time in the first half and condense it in the second, and thus create what is sometimes called “exilic narrative,” namely a narrative time that reflects the character’s inner time and that unfolds in relation to the character’s relation to space, a relationship which is always conflicted for an exile. The rushing or the condensation of time in the second half is reflective of Mona’s fluid and disoriented relations to space and to the loss of her solid ties to her native space. Of all the critics who have discussed the book, only Melissa Albert, writing in *Time Out Chicago*, pointed out the connection between time and space at the end of the novel: “Fittingly, the novel ends in Romania, on her first trip back. Radulescu beautifully evokes the timelessness of spaces, as Mona’s middle-aged self attempts to fit into landscapes she moved in as a young woman.”

SK: The love story between the narrator and her adolescent boyfriend make up the frame and many of the points of reference in the novel (I won’t give away any more of the ending than that!). What is your notion of the contemporary

love story and how the ideas of “first love” or “soul mate” were working in your thoughts as you were writing or revising?

DR: I am fascinated by love stories in general, but particularly those set in times of historic upheaval. In some very profound, ontological way, love stories are what connect us to our fellow humans across cultures and ages. I think at a fundamental level we can all connect to the image of people falling in love, making crazy or bad choices out of love, being transformed by love, being traumatized or enriched by it. So I don't really think that in terms of the power of emotions, there is even such a thing as “contemporary love story.”

The modern love story begins when we start considering two important things: the experience of sexuality for *both* the man and the woman involved in the case of heterosexual love stories and the role of gender construction or, to be more precise, of the ways in which the two partners defy or conform to traditional notions of gender. So I wanted to create a love story that is visceral in terms of emotions, transformative and unforgettable, but also one in which the woman does not get submerged in the love and in the will and subjectivity of the man to the loss of herself the way it so often happens both in life and in traditional representations of heterosexual love.

I worked very hard to create in the character of Mona a heroine who is capable of experiencing overpowering passion but who also makes her own decisions, who survives and has a part of herself that is not lost in the madness of love, someone who is both sufficient to herself and capable of passionate love. In a word, I wanted to create something of a female Romantic individualist and also an anti-Emma Bovary character, though she does have “bovaric moments,” as she herself admits with self-irony. A recent positive review on the Book Divas site is one sign that that young women connect very intensely to my book, so perhaps I succeeded in my characterization, at least to some degree.

Finally, through the characters of the lovers Mona and Mihai, I wanted to explore the questions about the tension between powerful first love and compatibility or depth or truthfulness of love. How much of a first powerful love is real? How much is invented and derives from a desperate need for love? Does the happiness of the lovers derive solely from their enjoyment of each other and being in each other's presence? Do issues such as sharing similar

preoccupations and political views affect the intensity of the love and the happiness of the couple? My protagonists' love is tested to the extreme. I wanted to explore what remains and what is gone after the initial fire and also what remains after the love has hit its head against obstacles, both those created by the outside world and those created by the lovers themselves.

SK: Journeys, both literal and metaphoric, are central to the main character's development (again, I won't give away the title reference more fully than that). Did you have in mind an archetypal journey motif as you were constructing the novel? Something else? Or did the journey announce itself during the course of drafting?

DR: Yes, I did have in mind an archetypal motif of the journey as crucial to the story and in fact of a picaresque novel, to some degree. The journey has marked my own life in a fundamental way, and I believe it is something I need to keep exorcising through my writing. I am surprised that the critics in America, even when raving about the book, have overlooked the metaphorical significance of the "train to Trieste" and its role in shaping the symbolic structure of the novel. My heroine follows a complicated trajectory along which she has to test herself, her inner strength and resources by moving, existentially, from girlhood to womanhood, from belonging to one country to being an exile, and spatially (as well as culturally) from one city to another, from one country, one culture, one language to another. The novel starts with her returning from the Black Sea and going to the Carpathians, and ends with her still on the move. Between the two points, she has travelled back and forth between Brasov to Bucharest, then out into the world through Belgrade, Trieste, Rome, Chicago, Indiana and back to the Carpathians. It is through the journey that she consistently creates and recreates herself and also that she keeps the freshness of her perspectives on life, her passion for life, her irony. She is to some degree always a stranger, but that makes her stronger and engages her more intensely with every lived moment. Her serial uprootings, so to speak, push her to develop a strong sense of self, to be her own country.

SK: *Train to Trieste* has already been translated into several other languages—congratulations on such a wide success! How do you expect audiences from

different cultures to respond to the novel? Did you have a particular audience in mind as you were writing?

DR: Yes it has, and it is being translated into nine different languages (Dutch and Romanian were already out this fall, and upcoming next year are, German, Italian, French, Greek, Hungarian, Serbian, Hebrew). I know that in Holland and Romania it has caused something of a sensation. A review in Holland (*Aktueel*, October 2008) called it “the best political novel since *The Kite Runner*, and in Romania there was a lot of buzz around the launching. The story of a Romanian-American writer having her novel translated from English back into Romanian, and the novel dealing with the Romanian realities of the eighties and later the exile experience of a Romanian in America and then her return back to Romania was seen as a unique phenomenon.

I would like to think I wrote for everybody, for posterity, but that’s a little pretentious. I can identify a few groups I was thinking of when writing and revising. First, in terms of origins or ethnicity, I had two different kinds of audience in mind: non-Romanians to whom I wanted to tell this particular story of this country, of this people, of these historical realities, and Romanians whom I wanted to remind what we have gone through, how we lived as oppressed individuals under Ceausescu, how we live and survive as exiles. One little clue to the existence of these two audiences is in certain linguistic details throughout the book. I have used Romanian words for certain foods or ideas such as the word “dor” or “tuica” (fermented plum brandy) and explained the words in the English version. The Romanian translation, upon my recommendation, has taken out most such explanations because you don’t need to explain to a Romanian what “tuica” or “mamaliga” is.

I also envisaged a male audience that is both fascinated and at times irritated by the sassy, impulsive voice and character of Mona, and a female audience who feels empowered or satisfied (maybe also irritated) by her. I envisaged a young audience reacting a certain way when I wrote the parts about Mona’s childhood and adolescent love and then another audience of adults in their thirties or forties for the second half of the book. The interesting thing is that I’ve gotten positive responses from people of both genders and of all ages, from both Romanians and non-Romanians interested in Eastern Europe and in that period, including those who didn’t know they were interested before they read

the book. The most moving recent email was actually from a young girl in Romania who said that, although she did not live under Ceausescu because she was too young, something in the character of Mona grabbed her and she read my book breathlessly throughout her classes at school. It's what I used to do in school in Romania when I got bored in class, read novels under the desk, and now a girl in Romania is reading my book just like that. When all is said and done, the more diverse my audience is, the happier I am as an author.

SK: Could you discuss your literary models or influences, if you have them?

DR: Anyone who decides to be a writer needs to read and study as much as possible about what has been written or created in their fields, so that they don't arrogantly start out believing that whatever they produce is golden. Imagine someone who starts a career as a painter who has no idea of classicism, Impressionism or surrealism and starts painting water lilies at Giverny. Anyone would tell them to just go and study the works of Monet and the Impressionist school first, right? I wonder then why the "anxiety of influence" seems like such a powerful undercurrent in the world of writers in America. Some of the world's greatest writers had role models, started first by imitating a mentor and then developed their own styles. T.S. Eliot, for instance, wrote brilliant essays on literature and believed that no writer can exist in a vacuum. Vladimir Nabokov wrote about his beloved Russian authors such as Tolstoy. Samuel Beckett was James Joyce's secretary, and his first writing was a critical essay on Dante, Vico, Bruno and Joyce.

So yes, I do have role models and influences and proudly proclaim them. As a teacher and critic of French literature, several of the modern French writers and their poetic, sensuous, incisive styles such as Albert Camus, Colette and Marguerite Duras are to me models of superb fiction writing. The Hispanic writers Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, Isabel Allende are my literary "Goddesses." I love Cisneros' poetic concision and stylistic perfection, where every word is like a precious bead on a string: nothing missing, nothing extra, her haunting mixture of melancholy and irony. I love Alvarez's daring experimentation with narrative voices, her mixture of harshness and heart wrenching emotionality, and Allende's superb mesmerizing story-telling techniques, the colorfulness of her magic realism and the diversity of her female characters. I was extremely

lucky to receive some priceless mentoring and support from Sandra Cisneros who generously leaned over my writing. She once told me that my writing reminded her of Marguerite Duras's. I think the comparison with my French role model made by my contemporary role model in the States was a moment of true writer's heaven. And indeed, as I was writing *Train to Trieste*, Marguerite Duras's haunting novel *L'Amant* (*The Lover*), also the story of a young first love and of unabashed discovery of female sexuality, was on my mind.

It has taken me years to develop my fiction writing and to actually have the courage to bring it out to the light of day. While I have produced scholarship at a relatively fast pace, I have been very slow with my fiction, and deliberately so, because I believe my academic career has given me a sense of what good or mediocre writing is, and I only wanted to bring mine out when I could be proud of it. I would be immensely flattered if anyone noted influences in my writing from European or American writers. I know my writing has its own original voice and style, but at the same time, it is wonderfully comforting to know as a writer that you situate yourself in a line, in a family or community of creative minds.

SK: What is your current creative project?

DR: I am in the middle of writing my next novel, tentatively titled *Black Sea*. I have a two-book deal with Doubleday in UK and am trying to advance vigorously on this book. The story takes place partly in an old Romanian city by the Black Sea, partly in Turkey and partly in Paris. It features also a strong heroine, this time a painter, a woman with an overpowering imagination. This book will be more of a political thriller mixed with a family saga, will have a wider canvas of characters, of different ethnicities, such as Turks and Gypsies, besides Romanians, and I am experimenting with more narrative voices, including male voices.