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Between the Communist Past and Early Democracy: The Power of the Autobiographical in C. G. Balan's *Crook Ltd* (*Escroc S. R. L.*) and *The Elevator* (*Liftul*)

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This article examines some of the autobiographical elements in two novels by Romanian writer C. G. Balan. These elements serve as a potent tool for creating culturally significant autofictions that act as testimonies of pivotal moments in the author's life. Moreover, these autofictions are embedded within larger social contexts that hold historical significance, specifically related to Romania's communist past and early democracy. Balan's method of shedding light on these events through satire of the key figures representing authority while simultaneously infusing the narrative with intense personal moments as experienced by the individual (narrator) produces striking contrasts. These serve as poignant literary depictions of life under a totalitarian regime and the uncertain beginnings of democracy, a time when numerous Romanians chose to emigrate abroad or migrate to the country's capital in search of better living conditions. The article also suggests that autofiction can be seen as a broader concept that encompasses more than just the incorporation of autobiographical elements into fiction.
Keywords: autofiction, lived experience, Romania, autobiographical, communist past, early democracy.

Since the 1930s, autobiography and the autobiographical have had a long-standing tradition in contemporary Romanian literature. They have appeared prominently in both fictional and non-fictional texts. The contemporaneity of older texts is ensured not only by the incontestable modernity and topicality of the texts themselves, but also by the modern translations of these texts. An example of autobiographical non-fiction, that now comes under the label of *life writing* and has high literary qualities is Mihail Sebastian's *Journal* (*Jurnal 1935-1944*),[1] which was not published in Romania until 1996 due to perceived controversies surrounding its content. Translations into French and English were quick to follow in 1998 and 2000, respectively, and they brought posthumous literary awards for Sebastian. Sebastian's autofictional *For Two Thousand Years* (*De două mii de ani*) (1934) was published in English in 2016, but again, its publication in Romania did not go without an incident: Nae Ionescu's notorious tarnishing preface which to everyone's surprise, including that of its author, was included by Sebastian in the first edition. The overall controversy of the novel – the representation of Jews in Romania – has been referenced by many historical and literary commentators, including Cella Serghi in her *Memories* (*Pe firul de păianjen al memoriei*) (1977), where she imputes it to the usage of the "I" pronoun (391) and which, when

[1] All cited translations from Romanian are mine. H.B.

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combined with the autobiographical, became an issue in her own *The Spider's Web* (*Pâza de păianjen*) (1938). It was the same "I" pronoun that, despite its known unreliability, gave such brute force to Marin Preda's epic mock confessional *The Most Beloved of Earthlings* (*Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni*) (1980). Despite not being strictly autobiographical, the novel was perceived to express the writer's conscious condemnation of the communist regime and its nefarious practices in no small part due to the presumed identification of writer and narrator, which may have resulted in Preda's controversial death in the year of the book's publication.

The new millennium looked rather inauspicious and was arguably rendered most memorably in art through a Dickensian outlook of Bucharest in a movie from the early 2000s – a landmark of the Romanian New Wave of Cinema – *Filantropica* (2002), which set the scene for a long sequence of dark imaginings of Romania in both film and fiction but was also based on aspects of the reality of those times such as rampant corruption, low salaries, high prices, and organized crime. *Filantropica*'s brutal honesty and sharp social criticism are startling, and its opening lines are both symptomatic for its time and prophetic for the whole decade: "Once upon a time there was a city where there were two classes – princes and paupers. Between them were the street dogs; they formed the middle class." (*Filantropica*). In the confessional manner of a fictional eyewitness, we have a tragicomic story told in a voiceover by a poor teacher of Romanian literature and aspiring amateur poet, Ovidiu Gorea (Mircea Deaconu), who swallows his pride and scruples and joins the criminal organization "Filantropica" to be able to live a more dignified life, which, naturally, turns out to be an illusion.

It is hardly surprising that the autobiographical and the mock-confessional first-person narrative have coexisted in Romanian literature from the 2010s onwards in an attempt to capture snapshots of a society experiencing its fair part of the global financial crisis. Sometimes the aim was for the sensational, but with the solid experience of the writers' having lived in both periods and occasionally in different countries and even on different continents since another phenomenon had already made its appearance in life and in literature: emigration/ (self-)exile. In order to grasp the ever-evasive present, these writers have occasionally referred to a more distant past, the 1950s, as in Ioana Pârvulescu's *The Innocents* (*Inocenții*) (2016). An expressionist turn of the represented reality could be seen in some writers' spike of interest in the dystopian novel. Undoubtedly, a projection of the lived experience where the writer's perceptions of a warped world have made themselves manifest in recreating a fictional nightmare can also be part of autofictions, as has been suggested by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf. In her commentary on "Hoppe's dream biography" in Felicitas Hoppe's *Hoppe* (2012), she claims that autofiction "takes account of the idea that desires and dreams are an intrinsic element of a person's existence and perhaps disclose more, and different things about a person than mere autobiographical data in chronological order" (27). What counts is the linking of the factual and the fictional, "by integrating real-life details into fantastical accounts and insisting on the truth of the fantastical" (Wagner-Egelhaaf 27). One such example from contemporary Romanian literature is Florin Irimia's second novel *Dark Window* (*O fereastră întunecată*) (2012) where most of the Bucharest residents suddenly turn into some sort of flesh-lustful zombie-like *inhumans* (*neoameni*), the lived event that has triggered the transformation in the novel being a child that was mauled to death by a stray dog in Bucharest in broad daylight.[2] Another exercise in dystopian violence with similar evil-infected characters and the Romanian capital as a setting can be found in Radu Găvan's much- acclaimed *Exorcised* (*Exorcizat*) (2015), which seems to have been occasioned by the writer's own perceptive experience of the Romanian capital. The childhood of the 1970s and 1980s is another important subject for modern Romanian writers, who aim to reconsider this aspect of their lived experience under communism. Numerous writers have produced work that is noteworthy. Among them are Mircea Cărtărescu, Dan Lungu, Ioana Pârvulescu, Florina Illis, Florin Irimia, T. O. Bobe, Călin Ciobotari, C. G. Balan, and Filip and Matei Florian. What they all have in common is the vivid recreation of an often magical childhood full of warmth and carefree escapades, especially when spent in a village, retold with a lot of humour in the tradition of Ion Creanga's monumental classic *Child-*

[2] Understandably, this tragedy resulted in mass protests and counter-protests which quickly spread beyond Romania's borders. Eventually, lots of stray dogs were slaughtered following a city referendum, which brought about accusations of barbarity from animal rights activists and gave rise to Irimia's novel.

hood Memories (*Amintiri din copilarie*) (1892). But darker tones inevitably tinge this portrayal insofar as children, in their innocent explorations of the world, occasionally bump into some less presentable faces of the communist regime, which serves to remind the reader that not all back then was sunshine and roses, not even from a child's perspective.

A writer who uses autobiographical elements in his novels with the topics and genres so far discussed is Corneliu G. Balan. Born in Bucharest in 1972, he spent his adolescence there before graduating from the University of Architecture and Urbanism. Following his emigration to Canada, he earned a Master's degree in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Ottawa. *Crook Ltd (Escroc S.R.L.)* was his first novel published in 2013 by the Bucharest-based publishing house *Humanitas*, winning him the award of UniCredit Bank for the best novel of the year. It was followed by *The Elevator* (*Liftul*), which was published by the same publishing house in 2019.[3] *Crook Ltd* and *The Elevator* share a common topic with other contemporary Romanian novels: they are both about the author's childhood in the 1980s. *Crook Ltd* resembles Florin Irimia's *Defect* (*Defekt*) (2011) in tracing the protagonist's subsequent emigration to western Europe and then Canada; both *Crook Ltd* and *The Elevator* are akin to Ioana Pârvulescu's *The Innocents* (*Inocenții*) (2016) in reconstructing childhood in communist Romania. Despite the mentioned semblances, which underscore a common preoccupation of numerous modern Romanian writers, as pointed out above, Balan's novels are completely original in treating both topics, the first employing a comprehensive sweep of life in rural Romania running parallel to swashbuckling comic (mis)adventures in western Europe, the second presenting the relived childhood in flashbacks to add tints of tenderness to a bizarrely comic, Kafkaesque dystopian Bucharest in the early 2000s. Both *Crook Ltd* and *The Elevator* have been translated into Bulgarian.

In his most recent analysis of autofiction, *Autofiction and Cultural Memory* (2023), Hywel Dix views the stories told by individuals as "becom[ing] embedded in the fabric of the society through the workings of cultural memory, the process by which certain people, experiences, and events from the past are re-narrated and mythologized so that they pass into the common consciousness" (1). In particular, "because autofiction appears chiefly concerned with the life stories of the named individuals who narrate them, whereas cultural memory is defined by its shift from the individual to the collective domain," Dix acknowledges that there is an inherent challenge to this assumption (1). However, he sees a possibility for this shift to occur in positioning the respective autofictive writers "as typical members of a given culture, society, community, or even nation" (1). Moreover, "by narrating their own stories such writers are also at the same time involved in narrating the wider stories and cultural struggles in which they have played a part" (Dix 1). Dix makes a formal distinction between autobiography and autofiction in the Introduction to his earlier *Autofiction in English* (2018). Autofiction lacks "a perceived standing among the audience" (Dix 3), which means that we are expected to understand prior common knowledge of the life-like important moments or key events in the portrayal of a respective person. Writers like Florin Irimia, Ioana Pârvulescu, and Corneliu Balan, among others, have penned autofictions through their heartbreaking novels that recall infancy. These authors inscribe themselves in the panoramic canvas of a recreated childhood from personal experience, and by the above definition, they have written autofictions. Unsurprisingly, given the tectonic shifts in social structures and strata that resulted from the rather rocky transition from communism to democracy, many writers from post-socialist eastern Europe have turned to reminiscing about the past through literature, with the intention of allowing those born in the new times to become acquainted with a very different social order, as an alternative to reading often ideologically laced history books.

Crook Ltd opens with a rather cool inventorying of all the assets which make the self-proclaimed crook so successful, not without a solid dose of mock self-promotion of a man who knows his trade (7-8). The Football World Cup is mentioned as the catalyst for the first significant wave of immigration to the west from Romania and Bulgaria as it became easier to travel outside those countries. The World Cup in question must have been the one in Italy in 1990, even though neither Romania nor Bulgaria played.

[3] To-date Corneliu Balan is the author of three published novels, the latest being *The Last Barracks* (*Ultima armată*) (2020).

However, people from both countries used the event as a way to get to the west. Since Germany is the narrator's preferred destination, getting there is anything but simple or short of tragicomic, potentially fatal adventures such as jumping from a moving train, getting on board a ferryboat without a ticket to Denmark, and sleeping on the stairs leading to the dormitories of a student hostel in Germany. He relies foolishly on a man who pledges to assist him in boarding the international train to Vienna without a ticket – an experienced crook who has "done" several nations (*Crook* 12–13), referring to his fraudulently gaining great amounts of money in those countries.

Chapter 2 begins with a brilliant abrupt shift in setting and tone, transporting us to the narrator's boyhood in rural Romania, in a village in the Ialomița district of southern central Romania. The opening sentence, in a single paragraph, sets a striking note: "I was four years old when my parents got smashed by a milk truck" (*Crook* 21). [4] This brutal event, which is formative for the narrator since he is consequently relegated to the care of his grandparents with all their intrinsic limitations as educators, is not an autobiographical fact, but signals a certain departure from active parental care. The childhood spent in the village, which was the case with many Bulgarian children in the 1970s and 1980s as well, was part of the growing up of the author and, respectively, the first-person narrator Marcel Zisu.[5] The narrator's childhood is rendered in vivid detail in which we understand the difficulties Romanians during those times had with the communist authorities due to ridiculous laws which were almost impossible to obey such as the ban on slaughtering the calves of cows. With insufficient resources to feed them and little money to gain, if sold as meat illegally, these domestic animals became a liability impossible to sustain. Without resorting to melodrama, in a quick sequence of startling incidents, Balan narrates how the small child tries, unsuccessfully, to help the calf avert its fate followed by the sense of betrayal in his grandfather's reaction of dismay, crowned by the unavoidable cruelty of the actual killing of the calf, an epitome of rustic naiveté, and the subsequent discovery of the calf's hide by a local official after the deed is reported by another villager to the authorities (*Crook* 139-148). Balan realistically recreates his childhood in the village, where he establishes equality between the locals and their livestock in their mutual lack of understanding, resulting in victimization by the communist state despite the latter's curious sanctification of the cow.

While the authorities are portrayed as implacable in their dealings with the peasants, they are stripped of their shells of impenetrability and are shown as individuals capable of their own feats of ingenuity when their survival is at stake – in satisfying the unbridled hunting and engineering prowess of the "supreme leader" of the country – Nicolae Ceaușescu whose projected public image is of greatness and competence in just about everything (*Crook* 215). Here the reported events draw on communist counter-establishment folklore, but they are presented as relevant to the lives of the ordinary men of the village despite not being part of the narrator's lived experience. Balan involves some of his characters in ridiculing Ceaușescu directly, unlike Philip Roth, who also incorporates autobiographical elements into his fiction and who, in his 2001 book *The Human Stain*, also features the then-leader of the nation, Bill Clinton, at his most controversial; the Monica Lewinsky affair is presented as a perceived national stain that society must distance itself from. The local government representatives are usually distanced from the narrator, thereby receiving a humanization they might not otherwise possess.

Balan allows the two narratives, the one about the growing up of the protagonist and the one about his immigration escapades in western Europe, to converge at the point where we are already convinced that living under communist rule in Romania could produce nothing but crooks, and that appears to be the only relevant natural development such a character could have, also due to the discrepancies in the general upbringing of people from the east and west and the typically low positions the former occupy when moving to the west. Even further, Balan portrays most of the eastern characters–not only Romanians but also characters from other Balkan nations[6]–as usually involved in illicit or illegal activities

[4] All cited translations from Romanian are mine. H.B.

[5] Literally, the so-called Marcel.

[6] Some Romanian academics argue that Romania is not a part of the Balkan Peninsula, which they claim extends from the Balkan Range in Bulgaria to the southernmost tip of the Peloponnese in Greece. Despite this claim, which is questioned by many others, Romania shares Balkan characteristics with its neighbours.

and relishing every moment of the experience at the expense of the gullible old democracies whose lax social structures permit such incursions and legal transgressions. Eventually, the enormously successful and surprisingly sentimental self-named crook, aka *the professor,* due to his encyclopaedic knowledge of crookery, returns to his motherland, loses his mind, finds himself in a mental asylum, and escapes from it. It is revealed to us that the entire book is his confession to a revered local priest.

The Elevator makes use of other autobiographical elements, illuminating another part of the writer's life, and incorporates them into the story. One of them is the author's love for mathematics that allows for discussions of mathematical problems adeptly presented to the reader as fascinating conjectures. The lived experience of spending time in Bucharest during the writer's childhood has allowed for an enchanting rendition of a partially imagined childhood in a broken nuclear family: the father has died but his voice has been recorded in a voicemail message, not yet deleted, and the young protagonist, when feeling lonely, calls his father's number only to be able to hear his father saying: "I'm busy at the moment, but if you leave a message, I'll bust my guts to call you back" (*Elevator* 48). The father from *Crook Ltd* does not live long; he dies at the very beginning of the novel's second chapter. He is described as being strong, muscular, caring, fond of boxing, and impetuous, yet in this instance, we witness the reconstruction of a different kind of father through flashbacks in the narrator's recollection. Even though he can sometimes be impetuous, this man seems to be quite loving towards his son and accepting of the mother's decision to leave him–possibly because he was too compliant. The father figure in *The Elevator* is a fantastic wizard who can magically transform the young child's mundane family routines into a magical world of space travel with endless adventures in store, rather than a knight in shining armour saving his only son from the evils of the world:

> When I became nine years of age, three days after my birthday, my father put some phosphorescent stickers on the ceiling of my room. He had brought them as a present, stickers in the shapes of stars. Venus, Saturn, planets, comets, constellations. It took him an entire afternoon since he made sure he arranged them into something like the Milky Way, one for the whole apartment. I don't think it had cost him much – all his presents were like this – but at night, after I turned off the lights, I literally remained without breath. I was floating in space! Dristor had remained down below, far behind, and my block of flats was racing at the speed of light towards the Final Frontier, with the mission to explore incredible, undiscovered worlds, where surely existed new forms of life and super-advanced civilizations. Sometimes, I surpassed even the speed of light and everything else, just by using those stickers of ten lei and fifty bani. Mum's dishes full of delicious food never quite had this success! (*Elevator* 48-9)

In the first, more autobiographical book, the parents do not get a chance to fully flesh out as characters because they vanish from the protagonist-narrator's life at a young age. Instead, they take on roles that are common in Romanian literature: the practical woman as a selfless, dedicated mother, and the spiritual, bohemian father, who isn't exactly a fixture at home but is often involved in love affairs that end in a divorce. Irimia's highly autobiographical *Defect* and Pârvulescu's *The Innocents* both feature a similar portrayal of the father figure; the only difference is that in the latter, the moribund father is merely a charming storyteller, and we are unaware of any extramarital affairs he may have had. This is because the novel focuses on reconstructing Brașov's communist past in order to condemn communist abuses of power and accompany the stories it presents with didactic lessons of conventional morality.

The nameless first-person narrator of Balan's second novel is perfectly suited for the dystopian Bucharest of his life as a young adult, where he enters the convoluted spaces of a corporation that experiments with sleep control – something the character only discovers on the last page of the novel. To his amazement, after being given the approval for a position in the company, he learns that his job will be primarily to keep company with a hard-working employee whose name is never mentioned to him. The Kafkaesque sense of being lost in urban and corporate spaces, where the character is at odds with everything and risks failing his enigmatic employer, Mr. Iosifescu, despite his best efforts to the contrary, is pervasive. The narrator's heroic but tragic efforts to carry out his ill-defined job responsibilities as he rides the lift up and down the building's many levels reflect the struggles of many young Romanians

trying to establish themselves in the country's newly organized society in the early 2000s. As the novel eloquently demonstrates, the youth of those years were perpetually alienated from public life, with decent work chances merely luring them to truly dark companies and activities where their ambitions were broken, and their fragile skills mocked.[7]

Irimia's postmodernist *Defect* corroborates Balan's representations of the decade. There, the dual narrator Eduard Tăutu (PE teacher) and Lorin (English teacher), who ultimately stand for the same personage, testify to teaching jobs being severely underpaid[8] but also obtainable almost exclusively through high connections or family relations which in themselves effectively undermine the value of the professional qualities an applicant may happen to have (Irimia 54).

Balan's years as a university student in Bucharest in the 2000s were undoubtedly influential in shaping his perception of the Romanian capital as a forbidding, dystopian environment where the ubiquitous stray dogs of *Filantropica* reigned supreme in courtyard spaces, particularly in childhood flashbacks when they were effectively more numerous in the city. Unlike Irimia's and Găvan's dark transmogrifications of humans, in which the latter are physically changed, humans in Balan's work appear to be unchanged on the surface but have lost much of their humanity. This becomes clear in the narrator's futile attempts to have meaningful conversations with people from all walks of life – doctors, taxi drivers, doormen, accidental pedestrians, and bus riders. While this communication breakdown, reminiscent of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* or Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, may not be considered so symptomatic of an invisible societal rift since it features conversations mainly with strangers, Balan makes sure that his protagonist-narrator investigates this further – by trying to engage verbally with colleagues of his only to discover that things are not much different. Still, as with any tried-and-true dystopia, there is a certain resistance, especially on the part of the young ones; in the novel, this is rendered through the nameless narrator's experiencing of the city. He is able to appreciate and relish beauty wherever he sees it – glimpses of nature in the urban environment or accidental impressions of girls appearing to be equally lost in their own worlds, innocently reposing on park benches, deceptively available, but in truth, as unattainable as the good jobs he is after. Eventually, the protagonist seems to have got cornered by the sociopathic developers and sellers of the sleep-inducing device, who are about to subject him to further torture, but salvation truly lurks round the corner. It merits to quote the very ending of the novel, which, as in *Crook Ltd*, leaves the male protagonist exhausted after fighting the world and his own demons. Thus, he is powerless on a bed in a clinic, where, in his delusional state, he sees a woman, who appears to be more accessible only when the guy is rendered inactive:

> How nice it is to feel sleepy! To feel your entire body willing to let itself be consumed by nothingness… You know those sweet dreams, like the ones you had in your childhood? It's like I feel them all aligned, one next to the other, like some ruffled turtledoves on an electric power line, waiting to take flight at any moment, all at once as if gone mad. But just before they could even try, the door of the room opened, and the poorly lit doorframe was illuminated by her presence. She came close slowly, as if unwilling to disturb me. She stopped within two steps of where I was. She was dressed in white and was observing me. It seemed she was making me a sign to speak, but as usual, I blocked. Her brown eyes were shaded by some long eyelashes touched by mascara, and for the first time I thought that God had brown eyes and was a woman. (*Elevator* 277-8)

Balan began with a highly autobiographical novel that was immediately well-received by critics and won him an award for best novel of the year for 2013. The novel was reviewed in *Diplomat Club* magazine, which highlights significant points in the writer's work. In contrast to their own post-communist nation, which they regard with mixed feelings–mostly contempt and intimidation, but also conde-

[7] The introduction and expansion of outsourced businesses in both Romania and Bulgaria throughout the 2000s was massive. The notorious call centres are still very much active and constitute an important factor on the job markets of both countries, especially Bulgaria where only very recently qualified work has received adequate remuneration.

[8] Even though teaching salaries were low in Romania, they compared favourably with those in Bulgaria, where they were even lower.

scension–against the innocent but hypocritical west that makes many promises but, in the eyes of eastern Europeans, delivers only on its illicit and illegal side–the review highlights the reconstruction of the new Romanian identity as firmly belonging to the eastern Europe of the 1990s (Buzatu 19–31).

Similar to Mircea Eliade, who captured the attention of his contemporaries with *Maitreyi* (1925), but whose moral dilemmas surfaced when Maitreyi Devi, the protagonist, reacted to what she saw as an insult to her femininity, and similar to a plethora of other autofictions that have generated comparable ethical controversy, Balan's debut novel raises ethical questions. Such a potential is far too likely to be disregarded, much like Eliade's novel, Cella Serghi's *The Spider's Web* (*Pânza de păianjen*) (1938), Sylvia Plath's *The Jar* (1963), or even more recent works like Nicole Krauss's *Forest Dark* (2017). As Eliade's early novel demonstrates, it usually takes some time before an author can be found "guilty" of being autobiographical. Until then and even after that, the text may still be read as pure fiction. Alternatively,, the author can declare right from the start that the novel contains autobiographical elements and while the possible ethical repercussions remain, such an admission on the part of the writer, who is otherwise in a confessional mode with the reader, perhaps secretly expecting a verdict that will in no way really affect him or her, simply helps to further legitimize the self as the subject of choice for the writer. In their Introduction to *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms* (2022), Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor see "the autofictional as a latent dimension of autobiographical writing in general" (8) with the understanding that "imagined and supernatural elements can support autobiographical references … and that there is an oscillation between fictionality and factuality in autofictional texts" (8). It is precisely this oscillation between fact and fiction that exonerates authors of possible claims to victimization or self-glorification, as some early accusers tried to do – not indicating in any way in the text which part is which. Rather, it can be argued that good autofictive writers, thanks to having been highly sensitive observers of socially important events and their own personal environment and experiences, have found a congenial writing form, using language and style, to render them in memorable texts, which mean much more to interested readers than reading separate nonfictional historical references. In the same vein, Corneliu Balan's two novels under consideration here, as well as the other novels mentioned above by Florin Irimia, Radu Găvan, and Ioana Pârvulescu, as well as many other texts, have created culturally significant references to Romania's lived communist past and early democracy with the intimacy of the personal touch. Some of the texts mentioned above have been translated into Bulgarian and into many other languages, especially Ioana Pârvulescu's text, also used in creative writing classes both in the original and in translation, thus increasing the vectors through which personal experience can become part of cultural memory.

It should be noted that both of Balan's novels are harshly critical of communism as a social system that fostered the emergence and proliferation of crooks and sociopaths, but they also demonstrate that human grace and dignity were conceivable even then. Furthermore, stinging satire fosters understanding and acceptance of a world that cannot be condemned too harshly because doing so would obliterate the lives and activities of many innocent people who had no choice but to be present, not to mention the first-person narrators. While the satirical mode persists in *The Elevator*, the bitterness is scaled down often to good-natured humour which is frequently mixed with self-irony. The death of the father in so many contemporary Romanian fictions, including Balan's, signals the clear realization that the old world of communism is irrevocably over and the children of the 1970s and 1980s should be able to build a better world for themselves and the generations to come, being effectively freed from the older male's authority. The fact that those children are largely on their own and may turn to illegal activities as young adults underscores the difficulty of this process. Traditional morality vanished along with the old world, leaving a gap that may take some time to fill as people make the difficult and drawn-out transition from the old to the new order. With these two books, Balan joins the ranks of contemporary Romanian autobiographical writers, who openly discuss their childhood under communism and the early years of democracy, denounce communism with conviction, and express a mixture of regret and sympathy along with a healthy dose of joy at discovering a world of postmodern complexities and untapped possibilities in an investigation of the complex and challenging human condition.

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