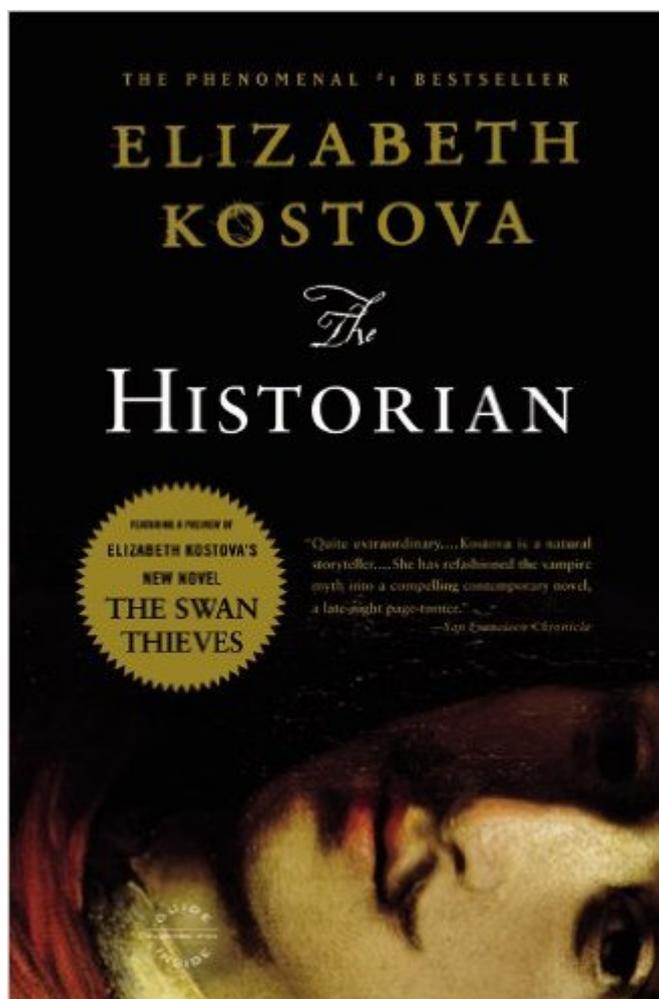


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The Historian



Synopsis

To you, perceptive reader, I bequeath my history....Late one night, exploring her father's library, a young woman finds an ancient book and a cache of yellowing letters. The letters are all addressed to "My dear and unfortunate successor," and they plunge her into a world she never dreamed of-a labyrinth where the secrets of her father's past and her mother's mysterious fate connect to an inconceivable evil hidden in the depths of history. The letters provide links to one of the darkest powers that humanity has ever known-and to a centuries-long quest to find the source of that darkness and wipe it out. It is a quest for the truth about Vlad the Impaler, the medieval ruler whose barbarous reign formed the basis of the legend of Dracula. Generations of historians have risked their reputations, their sanity, and even their lives to learn the truth about Vlad the Impaler and Dracula. Now one young woman must decide whether to take up this quest herself-to follow her father in a hunt that nearly brought him to ruin years ago, when he was a vibrant young scholar and her mother was still alive. What does the legend of Vlad the Impaler have to do with the modern world? Is it possible that the Dracula of myth truly existed-and that he has lived on, century after century, pursuing his own unknowable ends? The answers to these questions cross time and borders, as first the father and then the daughter search for clues, from dusty Ivy League libraries to Istanbul, Budapest, and the depths of Eastern Europe. In city after city, in monasteries and archives, in letters and in secret conversations, the horrible truth emerges about Vlad the Impaler's dark reign-and about a time-defying pact that may have kept his awful work alive down through the ages. Parsing obscure signs and hidden texts, reading codes worked into the fabric of medieval monastic traditions-and evading the unknown adversaries who will go to any lengths to conceal and protect Vlad's ancient powers-one woman comes ever closer to the secret of her own past and a confrontation with the very definition of evil. Elizabeth Kostova's debut novel is an adventure of monumental proportions, a relentless tale that blends fact and fantasy, history and the present, with an assurance that is almost unbearably suspenseful-and utterly unforgettable.

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Customer Reviews

This debut novel from Kostova contains elements from many of my favorite genres - thriller, suspense, mystery, historical fiction, and vampire lore. It is no surprise then that this supremely intelligent story was a very entertaining read. Though I feel that the story concept and character development deserve five stars, I feel that there are a few important flaws in this book which put it into the four star category. First the good: All of the characters in this tale are very believable, including Vlad Tepes himself. I really enjoyed the historical facts surrounding the Ottoman Empire and Eastern Europe that Kostova weaved into her tale. I also loved the way she used letters to reveal the more thrilling aspects of the story bit by bit. This kept me in that "I'll just read ten more pages" mode on many a late night. Now for the problems: The first 300 pages of this book were very compelling and hard to put down. Somewhere between page 300 and 450 it began to feel like Kostova had an old graduate school dissertation on the migration patterns of monks in the 15th century lying around so she decided to work it into the story. Wow did that slow the pace... I don't have a problem with the storyline taking the characters on a search for the history of these monks, it's just that Kostova occasionally strayed across the line between entertaining fiction and dry academic research. All of that said, my opinion as a librarian and avid reader of such stories is that this is an excellent book, well worth reading. I am sure that it will have wide appeal and is no doubt deserved of its huge marketing push. I have heard that there is already talk of a movie...

I've always enjoyed reading books about the occult and stories that weave them into historical events; moreover I've always been interested in the real Dracula - Vlad the Impaler. Therefore I was really anticipating the release of THE HISTORIAN, especially since it seemed to be getting positive reviews from critics. But it is with great regret that I have to say that this book is overhyped and disappointing. I admit that this book is still better than many of the books that are out there, but that's not saying a lot these days; and it's especially unfortunate to see that this is what passes for

good nowadays. The premise is certainly promising - the search for the historical Dracula. The story is told through three main narratives: that of the young girl that opens the novel; her father; and her father's mentor. The structure is an homage to Bram Stoker's DRACULA, which is also told through letters and multiple narratives. Unfortunately, the author may have been overly ambitious in this endeavor, as she failed to pull the whole thing together. The result is, if you're familiar with the genre, that you notice the structure too much, and so you are able to predict what will happen next long before the author writes it. For a mystery novel, that kills the suspense. It's a bit like seeing the boom mike hanging over a scene in a movie. You want to suspend your disbelief and immerse yourself into the novel, but the boom mike keeps getting in the way. Also, to pull off such a narrative structure, you need good, distinct characters. Unfortunately, none of the characters really stand out for me. They all seem one-dimensional, and similar, making it hard to attach yourself to the cast that doesn't distinguish itself from one another very much, so much so that every foreigner who happens to speak English has to comment on how they haven't had a chance to practice it, or how excited they are to have the chance to speak English. The narrative also gives the author an excuse to be verbose, so you'll find her describing the same thing over and over again, sometimes even using the same words. The pacing is also problematic. For the first 100 pages or so, it drags along, and doesn't really pick up till about page 120. But even then, it doesn't accelerate much, and loses steam very soon. The climax is anti-climatic, to put it mildly. In fact, it is so anti-climatic that it borders on being comical. I understand that they've auctioned this book for a movie for a 2007 release. Unless there's some major rewriting, this movie will really flop. I'll try not to nitpick on the plot holes, of which there are numerous, but I will point out the implausibility of running into people who just happen to do exactly what you're interested in. At first I thought there may be some sinister scheme, but the author chalks it up to "coincidence" and leaves it at that. As a doctoral student myself, I know how hard it is to find an article or a person who's doing exactly what you're doing, nevermind that they're talking about something as esoteric as Dracula. People just happen to sit in restaurants and find out that the person next to them is doing the same topic. Right! Finally, just a comment on the romance. It is not well developed. It's clumsy and adolescent, like a juvenile first attempt at describing sentimentality. It follows the cliché that every man and woman put together for a short period of time must somehow fall in love. There is no feeling in the romance, which cheapens the novel. If you enjoy historical narratives like THE HISTORIAN, or ones that weave in multiple narratives, I suggest any of the following if you haven't read them already: THE NAME OF THE ROSE and FOUCAULT'S PENDULUM by Umberto Eco, POSSESSION by A. S. Byatt, THE CLUB DUMAS and THE FLANDERS PANEL by Arturo Perez-Reverte. I myself am off to read

GOSPEL by Wilton Barnhardt. A final note: THE HISTORIAN is not bad. Understandably, it is an author's debut novel, and for that, it is still pretty good. I will still look forward to the author's next, but I hope by then she would have had better control of her writing. If you're just here for the ride, pick up the novel. I still read it through and stayed up doing it. But if you're looking for something deep or revelatory or well-structured, this is not it. Edit: I've just started reading GOSPEL by Wilton Barnhardt and I encourage everyone who enjoys books like THE HISTORIAN but who may or may not have liked it, to give this book a shot. It actually reminds me a lot of THE HISTORIAN, or at least as far as I'm into it. It starts out in Oxford with a doctoral student and a professor. However, the characters, major and minor, all come to life with a few words, and I'm not even 50 pages in. Moreover, the research is impeccable, which makes it even more exciting. I'm not sure if it was a hit when it came out in 1993, but perhaps the length (over 700 pages!) made be forbidding to some. But still, this is the type of book that THE HISTORIAN could have been.

The marketing campaign is underway and Elizabeth Kostova's debut novel is already being hyped as the "Dracula Code" or some similar slogan. I disagree with that approach, not just because they are quite different in more ways than just storyline, but because "The Da Vinci Code" was a good thriller with elements of history mixed in, but it is not even in the same league with this book. "The Historian" is an epic work of historical fiction that sweeps across Europe during the four decades between 1930 and the mid 1970s. It just also happens to involve the Dracula myth and a good dose of suspense. Now, some people may object to me calling this novel a work of historical fiction because it is mostly fiction and contains very few real characters. That is true, but Kostova does such an amazing job of making the Dracula myths come alive that you can't help feeling that the legends and the story are real. Her research is stunning in its attention to detail and the wide range of topics Kostova must've studied. A previous reviewer slightly criticizes Kostova for spending too many pages describing the pilgrimage routes of monks hundreds of years ago. While sections like that do slow down the pace of the novel somewhat, they don't distract from it. The last book that I read that combines elements of history, suspense, and great characters as well as "The Historian" was "The Devil in the White City". Highly recommended!

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