

EBRD Literature Prize 2021

How to be free: an interview with Matei Vişniec, author of *Mr K Released*

As a young man seeking political asylum in Paris in the last days of eastern European communism, Romanian playwright Matei Vişniec spent several months in 1988 writing a novel. With the authoritarian governments in his part of Europe moving closer and closer to collapse, the subject obsessing Vişniec was freedom, coming unexpectedly, and what you might do with it.

His literary taste ran to the theatre of the absurd – Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco – and his intellectual roots were in the remembered Mitteleuropa of the 19th-century Austro-Hungarian empire, with its multiple peoples, ramshackle if strict authorities, and complex, fantastical narratives binding them together. As he recalls, “I so liked absurd literature, fantastic or lyrical expressionist surrealist literature – I was very much in love with everything except socialist realism.” So the model he took for his 1988 novel was Czech author Franz Kafka’s surreal *The Trial*, written in 1914 and published after the author’s death in 1925, whose protagonist, Josef K, is bewildered to discover he is on trial for a crime so secret that neither he nor the court can know what it is.

Vişniec’s *Mr K Released* is a comically upside-down version of the same story. His protagonist, Kosef J, wakes up one morning in the prison where he has spent his remembered life, serving a sentence for an unspecified crime, only to discover he is being released. But why, and what comes next? Unable to understand his sudden liberation, Kosef J becomes more traumatised by the realities of freedom than by the familiar trauma of captivity. Hoping for clarification, he waits for an appointment with the prison governor, but their meeting keeps being delayed. While he waits, he begins exploring his physical surroundings. But he does not want to leave the penitentiary, with its mysterious tunnels and secret colony of “free” escaped prisoners living inside the grounds; even visits to his strangely smiling mother’s house in town, in the company of prison guards, leave him eager to return.

“I wrote this novel with no thought to publish it. It was such a very strong feeling that I had to try this experience, to understand how liberty works: where is the users’ guide, how do we use liberty, how we can lose it and how difficult is it to gain it again... It was like a sort of therapeutic writing.”

It was also a time of dizzy excitement for him personally. “I wrote this novel in a small room in Montparnasse. It was so, so interesting for me to write and then to go for a walk, to follow in the path of Beckett or Ionesco - Ionesco was still alive at that

moment and he lived in Montparnasse as well. For me Paris was an ideal country, a sort of mental country. When we came to western Europe, we [already] knew so many things about the West - it was our obsession, our horizon. And when I came to Paris I was really so happy to be at home, in a way - a free man in the museum of literature..."

Still, he didn't finish the novel. "All of a sudden I said stop, where I have to go with this novel?"

So he put it, unfinished, in a drawer and went instead to London to work for the BBC's Romanian service for a year.

At the end of 1989, the totalitarian regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu collapsed (he and his wife Elena were executed by firing squad), and a new life began in Romania. Vișniec came back to Paris and got busy with a doctorate and his own new life of journalism (Radio France Internationale) and writing plays in French.

"It was really a very pleasure for me to write in French. It was like being born again, in another life, with another sensibility, with some other subjects and another public - to write in an international language, it gives you another point of view. For 20 years I was like a crazy writer, writing every day, plays - I had a lot of contact with companies and some of these theatrical companies asked me to write plays for them. It was a lot of creativity."

"And then, all of a sudden, I was again interested in novels. And novels are a different world - I prefer to write them in Romanian, in my mother tongue."

"I had left this novel for 20 years. One day I tried to see if it is still interesting. I was astonished to discover the book was still alive! I was very proud to see, look, 20 years, it resisted! This is a sort of test - the resistance in time of a book, I think."

"And I was very close to the end. When I re-read it, I realised it was almost finished, I had only to complete the circle. So I wrote the two pages at the end to finish it."

Finished at last, the novel was first published in Romania in 2010.

"Perhaps it was too late to publish it in Romania to have a big impact, because 20 years after the fall of communism it wasn't really a very special event. But I had some prizes after publishing this novel. It was translated into four or five languages. And then I wrote some more novels - six novels and a book of short stories."

Without giving away any secrets, the ending that *Mr K Released* got 20 years after Vișniec started his novel is apt, neat - and not very optimistic. Was that a hangover

from the fears of the past? Would he perhaps write a more upbeat ending if he were to revisit the novel again today?

In reality, Vişniec says, it's the other way around - he has only got more pessimistic in the past 10 years.

“Ten years ago I think Europe was stronger than now. We believed more in progress. After the economic crisis in 2008, something bizarre happened in the world. We don't believe in the same way in progress, in science, in democracy. We also have this crisis with the pandemic, and Brexit is another very difficult moment for Europe.”

“For me the necessity of building Europe was the main ideology, the only ideology, after the fall of Communism. And since Brexit and this calamity with the pandemic, building this architecture of Europe is a bit weak, fragile, and people are not so optimistic as ten years ago....At the same time there are so many ideas coming to complicate our lives. Ten years ago we didn't talk so much about colonialism and decolonisation, or about gender theory or cancel culture ... now there are so many theories which cut across what I call universalism.”

“I'm an old-fashioned intellectual, believing that universalism is like mathematics: very important, very strong. We have to believe that we human beings have something in common. We can have a different religion, different sexual tendencies, different colour of skin, but what is really important is this universality we have in us: the same sensibility, the same destiny. And now I think this sort of minority philosophy is stronger than the universal philosophy which made me.”

This is what has been on Matei Vişniec's mind during lockdown. And it is the subject of his next novel.

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