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## INTERVIEW

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### *“You Have to Face Your Past” - An Interview with Paul Bailey*

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Writer and broadcaster Paul Bailey was born in London on 16 February 1937. He won a scholarship to the Central School of Speech and Drama in 1953 and worked as an actor between 1956 and 1964. In 1967 he became a freelance writer. His first novel *At The Jerusalem* (1967), set in an old people's home, won a Somerset Maugham Award and an Arts Council Writers' Award. *Peter Smart's Confessions* (1977) and *Gabriel's Lament* (1986) were both shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction. *Kitty and Virgil* (1998) focuses on the love affair between an Englishwoman and an exiled Romanian poet, a refugee from the Romanian regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu. In *Uncle Rudolf* (2002), the narrator remembers how, as a young boy, he was rescued by his uncle, a lyric tenor, from a fascist Romania. *The Prince's Boy* (2014), his latest novel, tells the story of Dinu Grigorescu, a Romanian writer in his sixties, who reminisces about his youthful adventures in the bohemian Paris.

**Interviewers:** After *A Dog's Life* and *Chapman's Odyssey*, your latest novel, *The Prince's Boy*, recently translated into Romanian, marks a return to Romania. You have dedicated a trilogy to our country: *Kitty and Virgil*, *Uncle Rudolf*, and now, *The Prince's Boy*. How did this love affair with Romania develop?

**Paul Bailey:** It began in 1989, when I came here. I was so intrigued: I'd seen nothing like it! It was a hellish place; I couldn't believe it. I was here at the invitation of the Romanian Writers' Union. They took me to all sorts of places, but they kept canceling all my lectures. I went all the way to Iași just to be told that my talk had been canceled. I was asked to give a talk at the University of București on the Friday, and I was told they'd been expecting me on the Tuesday. A lady called Mickey Irimia got on the telephone with her boss and, within an hour, about a hundred students turned up. This was breaking the law, because all the necessary forms had been signed for three days previously. Anyway, I remember the students being incredibly interested in life outside Romania. They wanted to know what was happening in the English theater, in the cinema, in art in general, so it was a very rewarding experience. They would have been denied it because the system was playing games with me.

I knew nothing about Romania when I came here. When I went back to England, I thought I'd read about its history, which is pretty bloody, but then, so is most history. I used to belong to The London Library. I took out books that hadn't been read since the 1920s or '30s, by English people who'd gone to Romania. The picture they gave of the country was

hugely romantic: all these happy, smiling peasants in Transylvania and very little about the actual politics of the place. You had a German monarchy: Carol the First, then Ferdinand, and Carol the Second. Though I am told that Carol the First never learned a word of Romanian, it gave the country a kind of stability, it united the two parts. There was great, classic book that I read in English, called *The History of the Romanian People*.

I learned a lot, I even took a Romanian teacher in London, a young girl who was studying at the University, Cleopatra Sava. I asked: "Is Cleopatra a common name in Romania?" and she said "No, it's my bloody mother!" She was a beautiful girl. She married her childhood sweetheart and they emigrated to Canada; I've never heard from her ever since. She taught me the basics of Romanian. I became interested, so I wrote *Kitty and Virgil*. That was another thing that struck me: people had these wonderful Roman names: Virgil, Ovidius, Constantin. I wasn't entirely happy with the book, but I put in almost everything I'd learned about Romania. I learned about religious customs which people in Bucharest had never heard of. One of them is that when somebody dies and the coffin hasn't been closed, you break the looking-glass so that their soul can escape.

**I.:** You know a lot about our history and our controversial periods: communism, but also about our fascist past, which many would like to ignore.

**P.B.:** I made friends here, in the literary and publishing world. I was asked by a quite famous magazine in London, *The Times Literary Supplement*, to review a book by Norman Manea, *Plicul negru*, translated into English as *The Black Envelope*. I think mine was almost the only review. Some weeks later, I received a letter from Norman Manea, from Bard College, where he still is, saying "you understood my book and you understood something about Romania, which I didn't expect anybody to know." So we became great friends. It started with correspondence. We wrote to each other for two or three years, then we met. I went to his birthday celebrations in New York a couple of years ago, which is where I met Luiza Vasiliu and Anca Fronescu. We are very dear friends. He taught me all about the absurdities of the Ceaușescu regime. In a whole book, *Despre clovni*, there is no reference to Ceaușescu or his wife by name. They are always referred to as clowns. He does say something very profound in that book: that the Ceaușescus and their regime gave an appearance of sanity which made every Romanian think that he or she was mad and these were the only sane people. This is politics at its most bizarre. We complain in Britain about our politicians, but we can get them out quite easily. The press is also very vigilant, particularly about things like money, sexuality, and financial corruption which, of course, is a feature of politics everywhere.

**I.:** Have you ever had negative reactions from Romanian readers who may have felt offended by your depiction of interwar Romania?

**P.B.:** One or two. Not too long ago, earlier this year, I did an event at the Romanian Cultural Institute, in the Romanian Embassy. I and Marius Chivu, my translator, had a chat. I read from the book in English, he read from it in Romanian. There were several people in the audience, one of whom is a painter and sculptress who doesn't live very far from where I live in London. She invited me over one night for dinner; it was typical classic Romanian peasant food, which I am quite happy with. This other woman, a homeopathic doctor, was there and she didn't like what I had written about Romania's fascist past. She was in her sixties, I think, and she was of the opinion that it was best forgotten. I think that you just cannot forget the history of what Romania did. It's all there, in Mihail Sebastian's *Diary*, which I reviewed in the *TLS*. When it came out, there were several critics who said that this was a conspiracy against Romania, which is such nonsense. The book is going to become a Penguin Classic!

You have to face your past, just like the British have to face what they did in Africa or India. In 1945, we were forced to come to terms with what we'd been doing in India. Some of it was good (we'd introduced cricket and Scotch whisky!), but we also did pretty terrible things. Whenever you invade a country, there are often compensations. Good things happen, particularly if a country is in a terrible state of disarray. An outsider country can come and put

things straight. Then, it's always money and power. What happened in Romania in the 1930s, I find terrifying. In the First War, Romania was with the Allies, with us, mainly due to Queen Marie, who was a very good person. The shade of Hitler and what was happening in Germany, the fact that people like Codreanu were going out into the countryside rallying the peasants: it's always in the interest of something which, to me, is terribly vague - the great national spirit. When people go on and on about the greatness of the British and the English, I don't want to hear. I am only interested in individual human beings.

**I.:** I was impressed that you also have vast knowledge of Romanian literature; you also seem to be familiar with our oral tradition of storytelling, *Miorița*, and so many legends. What attracts you to writers such as Mihail Sebastian, Ion Creanga, Caragiale, practically unknown outside our country?

**P.B.:** I remember reading a very romantic book by a man called Patrick Lee Fermor, who recently died in his nineties. When he was a young man, before the Second World War, in the 1920s and 30s, he traveled all over Europe. He was particularly besotted with Romania. He came to Timișoara, he learned the language, and the first thing he learned was *Miorița*. Of course, I was told that it was changed through the centuries, as people added things to it. The best book I read was called *Hotel Athénée Palace* by Baroness Waldeck, an American journalist, who must have married into an aristocratic family. She stayed at the Athénée Palace Hotel in Bucharest in 1941, at the beginning of the Second World War. She was in a very good position to see, as the hotel was gradually taken over by the German military (there were some Russians around at the very beginning). She is a great journalist, has a wonderful ear and eye, and the picture it gives of the country is just unforgettable. Norman Manea had never heard of it; I sent him a copy. It's been out of print for years, but you can get it on the Internet for practically nothing. She has these cynical businessmen who do business with the Germans in the lobby of the hotel. One of them says, "we hate Jews, but we prefer to do business with them!" The old man adds, "I would rather do business with a Jew than with a Romanian".

As for Romanian writers, I liked Eminescu, but the poet I was really taken with, and still am, is Bacovia. I love his poetry because it transcends nationalism. The poems are abstract in a way, they are about concentrated feeling. He coined the great line about Romania, "o țară tristă, plină de umor" ['a sad country, full of humour']. I have sort of put him in my book in the character of George Văduva, except mine will commit suicide. Bacovia did not commit suicide, he just drank himself to death. He worked as a city clerk and stayed out of politics. I think he is a great poet. A man called Peter Jay translated his poems very well, as near as you can get. I am hoping that some time they are going to be published. I think that the ideal thing would be to publish the English version on one page and the Romanian on the other.

**I:** Who inspired you to create the mysterious character of Prince R.?

**P.B.:** One or two people guessed: it is meant to be Emanuel Bibescu. I was protecting myself, because the real one didn't adopt a child. He and his brother, Antoine, were good friends of Marcel Proust. Antoine was an outgoing, seriously heterosexual man (women just queued up for him), whereas Emanuel was very mysterious. The more I read about him, the more I was convinced he was gay. Yet, he did nothing about it or, rather, it was all very discreet. He was incredibly knowledgeable, much more aesthetic than his brother. The Bibescus' mother, who had a *salon* in Paris and an estate in Corcova, was immensely calculated. When they were little boys, everybody went to this salon; they thought nothing of Wagner, Liszt or the impressionist painters coming in for morning coffee!

Romanian was their second language; I think they began speaking French. I went with Marius Chivu to Corcova some years ago; it was a ruin. Now there is a vineyard there, but what we saw was the wreckage of a huge estate. Russians had taken everything remotely valuable, so all that was left was this tiny Orthodox church (the family church) and a school. Of the great house itself, where Antoine and Emanuel used to spend their summer holidays,

there was hardly anything left. It is a different Romania. There we were, in this school, with a nice, bright school-teacher; the kids had computers and a Harry Potter film on them. I said I wanted to go to the lavatory and she said, "Oh, yes, go down there". I followed the smell down a path and it was just a hole in the ground! That's the paradox!

**I.:** Many of your characters, not only Romanian, are haunted by their past. Thus memory, loss, grief are recurrent themes in your novels. Why?

**P.B.:** It's life, isn't it? Years and years ago, when I was a tiny boy, my mother liked listening to the radio. She didn't like pop music so much, but rather that tuneful, in between kind of music; nothing serious. There was a terribly famous Austrian singer called Richard Tauber. He was a very ugly man, but had the most wonderful voice. He used to sing "Girls are made to love and kiss, / and who am I to disagree with this?" Then he says: "Can I be blamed that nature made me gay?" Of course, in those days *gay* didn't mean what it means now. One day, on the radio, I heard him singing the wonderful aria from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, "Dalla sua pace". My God, that man could sing! Coming to Romania, I thought operetta must have been popular here, as it was all over Europe. They must have loved *The Merry Widow*, *Die Fledermaus* and so on. So, in *Uncle Rudolf*, I decided to write about this handsome man who studies under the greatest voice teacher of the time. The scenes in the villa in Nice, where there is a parrot which shrieks every time the boy sings the wrong note: all that is real. I got that from an American book of memories of Jean DeReszke, a great teacher and a great singer. One of his students, a soprano who sang at the Metropolitan and then gave up singing to have a family, said that he always knew you were making a mistake when the parrot shrieked. Sometimes, the most outrageous things you put into your books are, in fact, the real thing!

**I.:** Family relationships, particularly those between mother and son, play an essential role in your novels. One doesn't need to be Freud to see that your characters also seem to be haunted by absent parents.

**P.B.:** My own experience is with an absent father. My father died when I was eleven years old. It is particularly poignant this year, because we've had all these "celebrations" of the beginning of the First World War. My father was there. He was enlisted in 1916, which was quite late, because so many young men had died. The first recruits were men in their teens or in their early twenties. By 1916, they were recruiting men in their late thirties and early forties, which was what my father was. I only discovered after my father's death that he'd had two families: he'd married, it took him about eight years to get a divorce, then he'd met my mother. My mother had me when she was forty-two, which was very late in those days. You took your life in your hands when you had a child. Now it's nothing. Women are having careers and then decide to have children when they are thirty eight-thirty nine. It was different then. He was much older than her. He died in 1948, when I'd just started going to school. All I can remember is that he was very, very old, because I was so young. It was very strange; my mother was also older than the other mothers. I used to remember at school, where the mothers and fathers would turn up, my mother looked much, much older. There were all these glamorous women, some only in their early thirties. They'd had their children at seventeen or eighteen, which is barely normal.

In *Gabriel's Lament* I transferred my father to a mother who is not at all remotely like my own mother. In that book, which I am still quite proud of, I imagined the father I'd never had. I got lots of letters from readers saying, "you've put my father on the page! How did you know?" The thing is: I completely made him up. When I was writing I thought, "how much more awful can I make him"?

**I.:** Your first novel, published when you were only twenty eight, centers around an old woman. Why this affinity for old characters, whom you depict with empathy and humor?

**P.B.:** Because my parents were older, I was surrounded by people in their fifties and sixties. In those days, you were considered old if you were forty! I never thought of them as being different, I always considered they were lively. After my father died, a couple looked

after me when my mother was out to work. I used to go over to their place, because where we - my mother, my sister and my brother - lived, there was no indoor lavatory, no bathroom, nothing like that. I used to go to these friends of my mother's, enjoying the luxury of having a bath and staying in it for hours or changing the water. So wonderful! They had lodgers, because they had a big house. One of the lodgers, as I put in the book, was a Scotsman who worked for the Royal Family. He played the bagpipes whenever they went to Scotland. This pair lived into their nineties; they were extraordinary. He had a Labrador which he was walking every morning, miles and miles, when he was ninety six! Can you believe that? It was because they had a work ethic in those times. They'd worked hard all their lives; they'd had to work when they were very young: hard, physical work. It sustained my mother, who lived to be ninety. She was kept alive because she was so sarcastic. She was constantly critical of everybody and that gives you wonderful energy.

**I.:** You are also a literary critic. Does the critic influence the writer or vice-versa? How do they manage to live together under the same roof?

**P.B.:** With difficulty, sometimes. I've stopped reviewing novels. I'd review one or two in a year, but I used to review a lot. Now I write a regular theater column in London, for a magazine called *The Oldie*, which I've been doing very happily for the last four years. I go to the theater three or four times a month. Because I am trained as an actor, I was an actor for about eight years, I've never lost interest in the theater and what it can do. I love the movies, the cinema, but there is something about the theater. I love writing about it: acting, direction and, of course, the writing. A new play, saying something interesting, or revivals of plays I saw thirty or forty years ago, which seemed terribly daring then: to see how they've survived, why were we all so carried away then, it's an interesting experience. When it comes to literary criticism, I tend to write longish pieces about writers I think are not well-known enough. There's quite a few, not just Romanian.

**I.:** Do you ever surprise yourself when you write or do you know everything in advance?

**P.B.:** I have to surprise myself. I wouldn't write if I couldn't surprise myself. I always have one scene in mind when I start writing and I work towards that scene, but usually it doesn't happen. When I wrote *The Prince's Boy*, it was full of surprises to me. But I'd been reading masses of stuff for years about that world in Paris. The brothel-keeper in the book, Albert, had been a real brothel keeper. That is a real brothel, and it did have a Mme Proust's chaise-longue. There was a wonderful liar called Maurice Sachs, a friend of a writer called Violette Leduc; there is a recent film about her. She was brought up as best as she could be and he wrote a book called *La Batarde*, a sensation in the 1950s. It was all about a girl who never found out who her parents were. She became friends with people like Simone de Beauvoir. She was a friend of Maurice Sachs: bisexual and a colossal liar. He was a Jew who converted to Catholicism, and then converted back again. He went through a homosexual period. I think he was Andre Gide's secretary for a while. He decided to go to Albert's brothel, so I thought I'd have fun with him. But the female brothel-keeper in there, I made up. There's a scene in that book when the two brothel keepers are together, laughing.

**I.:** That's a great scene! In an interview with the late Angela Carter, you asked her whether she felt an English writer, since she was considered to be so un-English. What about you? Do you consider yourself an English writer?

**P.B.:** I interviewed her two weeks before she died. She was dying, but she was very funny over the microphone. Because of her interest in folk-tales, myths, all that sort of thing, Angela was a really original writer at that time. Most writers, particularly women, were writing about domestic life, marriages that went wrong, coping with children, the stuff of life. But she had different ideas. She also went to Japan and lived with a Japanese man for a long time. We shared the same agent, so I knew her quite well at the end of her life. As for myself, I think I'm European. I am not stuck in England anymore. I don't want to be. There was a period in the 1980s when I traveled all over Eastern and Central Europe. Of course every

country is different, but I came across the same dissatisfactions. I've got a lot of Polish neighbors in London; most of the people who come and do the hard work are Polish. A Romanian from Timișoara is working next door. He is very funny. He speaks about ten words of English, so we talk in basic Romanian. In London, you can get on a bus and not hear English spoken. This terrible man who runs this ridiculous party called UKIP says you can't hear English and I think: *so what?!*

**I.:** Even though your novels deal with loss and grief, they are suffused with a great sense of humor. In an interview, you say that Dostoyevsky is very funny and that *Crime and Punishment* has many jokes, even though many readers seem unaware of that. How important is humor for you? Do you see yourself as a comic writer as well?

**P.B.:** If a book doesn't have something that makes you laugh, I'm afraid there's something wrong with the book. I would say, as a generalization, that the writers I am attracted to are the ones who make me laugh. For instance, the Czech writer, Hrabal. He was unpublished for a while in the old Czech Republic, because the censors didn't understand what the books were about. They were suspicious of books that were funny. One of my favorites is *I Served the King of England*. So funny! Hrabal is a wonderful man and he didn't live in literary circles at all. He trained as a lawyer, then he gave it up because of the Germans. Then the Russians came, so he decided that he would write when he wanted to, but spent most of his time in a pub in Prague called *The Golden Lion*. He said he didn't want to meet writers, as he learned everything he could about life from *The Golden Lion*. Real people came: cab drivers and prostitutes. Kundera thinks he is the greatest because his doesn't seem to be literature; it just seems to happen.

I brought with me a new translation of *Crime and Punishment*, because I thought I might have time to do some reading. I had to adapt *Crime and Punishment* for the stage some years ago; I've still got the old translation, with my marks. Porfiry, the police inspector, is one of the greatest comic characters. He knows immediately that Raskolnikoff is the murderer, and he is playing cat and mouse with him. It's a wonderful book, based on the real case of a Frenchman who committed murder. In *Chapman's Odyssey*, I use *The Idiot*, a book I've always loved.

**I.:** There is an article in *The Guardian* about *The Prince's Boy*, which states that you have suffered a transformation from the Booker nominated *Gabriel's Lament*, "bursting with Dickensian energy", to your latest novel, which is more "distilled". Do you agree?

**P.B.:** It's deliberate. *Gabriel's Lament* was a very difficult book to write, because it took a long time, something like four years. I had to work and write reviews and I was living with somebody who was dying, so it was a traumatic time. But all the critics who liked it used "Dickensian". It's a sort of easy word to use. I did grow up with Dickens and I suppose, when all is said and done, he is the writer that I love most, particularly *Great Expectations*. But there are parts of all the books which are terribly funny. Now I only want to write short books. Just give the essence, don't waste any words. Let the reader do some of the work, fill in the bits that you couldn't or didn't want to write. You can't teach writing, but when I teach at the university, I say to them, "look, some stories are better for having left things out. You can tell a reader too much; you mustn't".

**I.:** That's why I feel that there's much poetry in your prose! Have you ever written poetry?

**P.B.:** Yes, I have, when I was a kid. Most kids, when they write poetry, think that it's going to be wonderful. When I see kids now, at the University, what can I say? "Put it in a drawer and forget about it, just live a bit more?" I was looking after this friend when he died and some years later I wrote a poem which was immediately accepted by the *Times Literary Supplement*. I wrote some six or seven more that year, and they all ended up in the *TLS*. Then they stopped. I've tried since, but I don't have that compulsion.

**I.:** One last question: you have started a new novel. What will it be about?

**P.B.:** It is the same as when I started *The Prince's Boy*, about five years ago. I put it aside and started to write something else. I wrote about a hundred pages of this other book. At the risk of sounding melodramatic, two or three years ago I actually did think that I was going to die. I was in hospital for quite a while, so I thought I'd finish this one. I read what I'd written and thought: this is ok. It's the only book I've written at night. I tend to write at daytime, in the morning. But I would sit up in our kitchen at the top of the house, drink a glass or two of red wine, have some dark chocolate and it happened: I finished it. Then, earlier this year, I read what I'd written of the other book. It's much more of a conventional novel than anything I've written for a long time. I thought: "Just cut it. Take it from a different angle". So at the moment I am worming my way into the book. It's an idea I've had for a long time. It's about the theater, about an actor who goes mad. He is based on somebody real, but I've got to make him real on the page. He mustn't be a copy of somebody who's already lived.

In real life, he was the son of a famous academic, who wrote classic books on D.H. Lawrence, W.B. Yates etc., and gave me one of the best reviews I've ever had in my life, so I am rather fond of him. The son was completely un-academic. When the Dada movement started, the idea that theater can be made up on the spot was much more common in Europe, and very common in Romania. You don't need a play, you can get a group of actors together and they can start improvising: there's been a lot of that in the English theater. The man that I want to write about was one of the cast of a group which is disbanded now, the National Theater of Brent. They did the *Charge of the Light Brigade*, then *The New Testament*. This actor played The Virgin Mary, knitting a scarf. At every performance, the scarf was getting longer. He was a man who really did end up tragically. He walked onto the motorway: a very selfish way of killing yourself, like people who throw themselves under trains. Quite often they are not the only people who die. The shock of killing someone that a train or a car driver has stays with them forever. I am not putting that in the book. In fact, I don't think I am going to kill him off at all. I just think I am going to have him go completely mad.

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## POETRY

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### *Leah Fritz*

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*Leah Fritz, an American ex-pat in London since 1985, has had her writings published on both sides of the Atlantic. Her essays and reportage in the United States were collected in Thinking Like a Woman, published by WINBooks in New York, and Dreamers and Dealers: An Intimate Appraisal of the Women's Movement, by Beacon Press in Boston. Both her prose and poetry have appeared in The Guardian, Poetry Review, PN Review, Acumen, The Literary Review, and London Magazine, among many others, and in anthologies, as well. She has judged several poetry competitions. Her archives are at Duke University in the United States.*

*Leah's first Romanian poetry co-translations, with Alina-Olimpia Miron providing the literal interpretation, are in Deepening the Mystery, by Cristiana Maria Purdescu, published by Editura Semne in Bucharest. Poems from that volume, and with Ioana Buse from Born in Romania by Liviu Ioan Stoiciu, published in both languages on the internet by Contemporary Literature Press in Bucharest, have been reprinted in Modern Poetry in Translation, Acumen and Poem Magazine. Working with Prof. Lidia Vianu of the University of Bucharest, she has re-interpreted the work of numerous Romanian poets for Poesis, an internet anthology of the Writers' Union of Romania.'*