

From *The Brothers of Consolation*

Patrick Besson | Translated by Edward Gauvin from French (France)

Born in 1956 to a Croatian mother and a Russian father, the unpredictable Patrick Besson burst precociously onto the scene with his first novel in 1974. He has since produced, with the same dizzying force that informs his headlong prose, more than twenty books, including his Croatian saga *Dara* (Albin Michel), winner of the 1985 *Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie Française*. The *Prix Renaudot* and *Populiste* followed ten years later, for his novel *Les Braban* (Albin Michel, 1995), on which occasion he was dubbed “The Prince of Paradox” for shocking the world on separate occasions by championing Mike Tyson and the Serbians. He is a communist by

upbringing, polemicist by practice, prodigy by talent, and *enfant terrible* by trade.

Les Frères de la Consolation is a feast of a novel. Originally published in 1998, this Goncourt-nominated epic takes its title from Balzac’s *L’Envers de l’histoire contemporaine*. It sweeps readers from Greece through the glittering Paris of Sand, Musset, Gay, and Dumas, of cholera and the barricades, of Gavroche and Vidocq, all the way to America, across the turbulence of the mid-19th century, trailing headlong the adventures of two Serbian brothers: Miloš the warrior and Srdjan the poet.

Their cousin Milena, married to the Count de la Renardière, loves Miloš. Srdjan loves Milena, and Miloš is a force of nature. Besson's cavalcade of notables includes the real, the imagined, and the larger than life, who have since become legend. A portrait of society sparkling with deceit, in which every line of dialogue is an enticement or a riposte, a quip or a barb, *Les Frères de la Consolation* presents a world dizzy with vice and glory, whose only grace is transience.

Besson's swift, decisive prose seems at first to render on his characters gadfly judgments that, on closer examination, turn out to be profound: a look, a line of dialogue, a facial feature seized upon and made, by his knack for turning a phrase and then reprising it to provide a key to character in all manner of contexts. Miloš is his mustache, Srdjan his height, Nerval his melancholy, and Hugo his obsession with money; each mention of a defining trait adds a layer of reality and animation to figures fictional and historical alike.

This early chapter was translated in a fit of enthusiasm long before finishing the novel, or even reaching a point that gave me a sense of how it played into the story. Pages go by—in fact, the whole first part of the book—without indication that it is more than the episode it seems. It's a testament to the novel's roominess and impact that long after a series of Parisian set-pieces have shuffled Miloš' marriage from the reader's mind, it returns to lodge stubbornly in the plot, a obstacle to the characters' happiness.

What drove me to render Besson's chapter in English was the rhythm of his sentences—the same clip at which I imagined his horseback hero galloping along; his cynical wit; and his ultimately large-hearted chivalry, like that of a slightly soured Dumas. Here is a novel of, as Jean-Rémi Barland would have it, “princely melancholy.” *Ko traži naci će.*

Original text: Patrick Besson, *Les Frères de la Consolation*. Paris: Éditions Grasset, 1998.