



For Two Thousand Years

Mihail Sebastian , Philip Ó Ceallaigh (Translator)

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'Absolutely, definitively alone', a young Jewish student in Romania tries to make sense of a world that has decided he doesn't belong. Spending his days walking the streets and his nights drinking and gambling, meeting revolutionaries, zealots, lovers and libertines, he adjusts his eyes to the darkness that falls over Europe, and threatens to destroy him.

Mihail Sebastian's 1934 masterpiece, now translated into English for the first time, was written amid the anti-Semitism which would, by the end of the decade, force him out of his career and turn his friends and colleagues against him. *For Two Thousand Years* is a prescient, heart-wrenching chronicle of resilience and despair, broken layers of memory and the terrible forces of history.

For Two Thousand Years Details

Date : Published February 25th 2016 by Penguin Classics (first published 1934)

ISBN : 9780241189610

Author : Mihail Sebastian , Philip Ó Ceallaigh (Translator)

Format : Paperback 231 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, Romania, Classics, Historical, Historical Fiction, Literature, European Literature, Romanian Literature

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From Reader Review For Two Thousand Years for online ebook

Jasmine says

"Despair is a sentiment I have long suppressed, knowing how oppressive it is in a Jewish sensibility. I will not go back to the ghosts I have left behind. Is a 'new dawn' on the way? It surely is. But until then the dusk will be slowly gathering over all I have loved and love still."

Mihail Sebastian, 1934

John says

When Mihail is writing about Romania, current events, or his main character's associates the book is interesting. When his main character is in an internal monologue it/he comes off as snivelling and insufferable. I feel a little bad having read this when I haven't read any Stefan Zweig, but a Romanian colleague praised it so I thought I would humour him, and I'm not necessarily sorry that I did.

Surabhi Chatrapathy says

A Romanian author, Mihail Sebastian lived when Nazism was spreading across Europe. His work, For Two Thousand Years is focused around the time when Jews were granted citizenship in Romania. A very tumultuous time for the country, Sebastian has accounted for this time in a very unique fashion.

Presented through the protagonist's journal, the book meditates on what it means to be a Jew. What it means to 'belong' to a nation, to a religion. With a wide range of characters, each largely different from the other, he brings together the various school of political beliefs in a conflict ecosystem.

He has no binaries to present for you. He has no glory or condemnation to speak of. He has only doubts, inconsistencies, and confusion to present. He repeatedly offers the double standards, the ironies and the questions. Infused with self doubt and criticism, he has no political affiliations or high moral grounds to speak of. He criticizes himself for this too.

I would not recommend this book to everyone, it's highly political, verbose and takes rereads to understand what he is trying to say. Yet I wish everyone would read it, as it speaks of important aspects of one's identity. In the world today, when the political climate is going through waves of problematic changes this book gives a lot of food for thought.

Laurent says

Een vergeten klein meesterwerk uit de Roemeense literatuur. Over anti-semitisme in het Boekarest van de jaren 1920. Sebastian's debuutroman VROUWEN is net vertaald door Jan H. Mysjkin voor uitgeverij Vleugels. Hopelijk staat deze roman ook op Mysjkins to-do-lijstje/

Adina says

26 September: There is a Goodreads Giveaway for this great Romanian novel here (US only):
<https://www.goodreads.com/giveaway/sh...>

For two thousand years is an important book about the interbellum period and the life of a Romanian Jew during a period when the anti-Semitism feelings were growing in intensity and violence. Although I read the novel in Romanian I will write my review in English as the book was published for the first time in English last year and I want to encourage readers to give this book a try. I believe it carries important messages from the past that are valid today, just as much as then.

I chose this novel as part of my challenge to read a Romanian author per trimester. Unfortunately, I neglected my co-nationals for many years, which is unfair as we have many talented writers. I chose Mihail Sebastian because he is my husband's favorite author and I promised him (a few years ago) that I will read this novel.

The novel has the structure of a journal and this is the reason it feels so autobiographical. Although the political and the social background is real and so are some the events from the author's life the book is still a work of fiction.

The narrator, a young Jew student, struggles to find an identity, torn between two worlds. He tries to put space between him and the Jewish mentality. He does not consider himself a Zionist, tries not to get into fights as his other Jewish friends and struggles against the inclination to feel persecuted. His beliefs, together with the ones of his generation, come alive through dialogues with his friends, teachers, articles and monologues. We follow the narrator thorough different stages of his life, from 1923 to 1934.

The quality of the work did not feel linear. The first and the last part one were for me the most important moments of the novel. The first part described the persecution the Jew students had to endure at the university while the last part deals with the internal torment of the narrator when he discovers that some of his oldest friends are anti-Semites. I want to focus on the last few pages of the novel which put forward two ideas that made an impact on me, especially taking in consideration the current political/social climate.

The first moment that impressed me was a conversation between the unnamed main character and a friend. Although the friend did not consider himself anti-Semite, confides that he believes there is a Jew problem which needs to be solved. 1 million eight hundred Jews are too much and if he had the power, he would try to eliminate a few hundred thousand. He goes on to say that he is not anti-Semite but there is a danger of the Jew spirit and as a Romanian, he has to protect himself. The narrator, surprised to hear that from his friend reply that there are two types of Jew haters: the pure ones and the ones with arguments. He says that he understands the first ones as they are a fact but not the latter. He continues by highlighting the fact that it is a waste of time to try to change an Anti-Semite with arguments because they are biased and any logic or argument will not be able to change their mind. He makes the case that the arguments are in fact excuses. Those people are not anti-Semite because they believe in the Jew danger, they believe in the Jew danger because they are anti-Semite. I think this is something to think about when we consider the growing racism today. I believe it was always there, only that now people are happy they found again excuses for their beliefs. It is the same old inclination to find scapegoats for a crisis.

A lot of the today problems are caused by the question of belonging. Since birth, the narrator thought of himself Romanian, a man of the Danube. However, starting from the school years the feeling of belonging to his country was denied to him, he was not allowed to refer himself as part of the same people. He was categorized as Jew and could not be anything else. This ignited an interior conflict, he was Jew but he also felt Romanian but with a sort of fear to love something that it was denied to him. I see in the news that many of the second generation citizens feel like they do not belong anywhere. I wonder now if it is their fault or they are denied the right to call their home home.

Dana says

"De două mii de ani" este confesiunea dureroasă a unui tânăr intelectual de origini evreiești ce încearcă să-și găsească un loc în societatea românească interbelică, dar și o oglindă a unei epoci tumultuoase, ce prefigurează schimbările noii ordini de după cel de-al Doilea Război Mondial. Mihail Sebastian (pe numele său real, Iosif Hechter) scrie un roman aflat la intersecția dintre ficțiune și jurnal, într-o voce narativă extrem de personală și implicată. Subiectivismul și emoția acestei relații la persoana întâi creează un text vibrant, în care accentul cade preponderent pe trăirile interioare.

Dacă în primele pagini din roman, narațiunea este fragmentată, alcătuită din gânduri și reflecții aleatorii, acțiunea începe să se concretizeze în momentul în care spațiul temporal devine clar. Suntem în apropierea lui 10 decembrie 1922, dată ce a intrat în istorie ca fiind „începutul mișcărilor studențești împotriva elementului evreiesc”. Eul narativ este surprins în plină mișcare antisemită și este supus valului de huliganisme ce cuprinsese România la acea vreme.

Sub pretextul „numerus clausus”, adică limitarea numărului studenților evrei în universități în funcție de procentul populației, începe valul persecuțiilor. Sub lozinca „Jos jidanii!”, cei care nu se conformează sunt dați afară de la cursuri și bătuți sistematic. Revolta personajului este mai mult interioară, decât cea exterioară este înțebuită prin pumni. În încercarea de a-și înțelege destinul, observăm că există o foarte mare voluptate în ideea fundamentală potrivit căreia a fi evreu este sinonim cu a fi persecutat.

(fragmente din recenzie completă: <http://matricea.ro/de-doua-mii-de-ani...>)

David says

My wife was born in Romania before migrating to Australia age 8 with intelligent hard-working parents who never really landed on their feet in their new country. I have been to her home town of Timisoara (a university town in the west) and have driven in a Dacia over the broken, pock-marked streets that may never be repaired. Late at night, when the rest of Europe tunes their TVs to smut, the Romanians broadcast high-school calculus classes - something more like 2nd year university mathematics in Australia. The people are warm and intelligent, quick-witted and hopeful - hopeful for the future of a country that sits between east and west Europe and has been savaged by both. It is hard to not see the Romanian people as a people who have endured much more than their fair share.

For Two Thousand Years is about a Romanian Jew (twice wronged, perhaps?) who identifies closely with neither. He wanders through pre-war Bucharest vaguely interested in philosophy, architecture, women, and avoiding a beating. It is a bleak work that refreshingly does not proselytize or point the finger, even. It is not

hard to draw parallels between the anti-semitism of 1930s Europe and the Islamaphobia of current times.

Kristi says

This book is a work of art.

Sebastian excellently, as well as chillingly, charts the anti-semitic waters of Romania in 1930s through the eyes of a Law student. Prescient, complex, and profound. This book asks pertinent questions around 'What is a human being?' and 'What is knowledge?', as well as exposing the oscillating affinity and dislocation one can feel in the only land one has ever known as, and called, 'home', and the people one has called 'friends'. Sebastian draws up beautifully the differing gauges of thread joining together the complex, diverse, and inconsistent interrelationality between his colleagues, peers, friends, and professors against the political backdrop and tensions of the age.

I found this book not only a heart breaking narrative of the 1930s, but also, perhaps, a prophetic insight into today's current socio-political issues.

I highly recommend this first, wonderful translation of For Two Thousand Years for any thoughtful, patient reader. Having said that, I think it should be required reading!

Meghan Rosenbaum says

This novel was one of those that "spoke" to me before I had even picked it up to examine its contents. Then, while I was reading it, there was some parts that I related to so deeply (specifically in terms of feeling so confined and alone to my own awareness, and thereby alienated from a lack of common understanding). Such a book is further proof of why we read, to feel less alone, to know others have felt as you do in the bare bones of existing.

Our protagonist is a young man who describes his experiences of poignant existential alienation from society. He is isolated on the basis of being Jewish, and throughout the book he grapples with his sense of Jewish identity. Even among his fellow Jewish peers he struggles for a sense of belonging. He is indifferent to the strong political mindsets of his peers, and seems to wish that he could simply "be" without reference to a social, religious, or ethnic category. Although he faces the same struggle as his peers, he cannot seem to align himself with their cause. He does not share in their fervour and seems overcome by his own feelings of shame surrounding being Jewish. Whether this is correct or not, I certainly picked up on it.

The author, Mihail Sebastian, had I believe, a talent for exposing the raw, melancholy emotion underpinning so many situations. There was a feeling of profound futility to notions of identity, and prescribed conduct within identity that I can really relate to experiencing.

A revealing novel that I will read again.

Inderjit Sanghera says

“For Two Thousand Years” is a book which slowly grows on the reader; at first the series of what could loosely be described as vignettes can be jarring, not so much due to the style, but more due to the remorseless adolescent cynicism which pervades them, like Halden Caulfield on crack. However, as the reader becomes accustomed to the slightly broken cadence of Sebastian’s prose style, as the cynicism slowly gives way to profound insights into the nature not just of antisemitism, but of societal prejudices in general, as the feeling of desolation which drives the narrator’s isolation becomes increasingly apparent, the reader begins to understand the narrator’s diffidence, his pessimism, as he struggles not just under the weight of a wave of local antisemitism, but two thousand years of anti-Jewish prejudices. As the narrator points out, even those Jews who re-locate to Israel will forever bear the load of two millennia of hatred.

“For Two Thousand Years” is especially insightful because it explores the rise not just of antisemitism, but of Zionism in its incipient stages. The narrator comes across a wide array of characters, mainly intellectuals of some sort, with whom he discusses both weighty political and metaphysical topics to more quotidian, though no less important topics, such as women and love. None of the secondary characters are granted internal narratives or lives, instead they are all seen via the lens of the narrator, their motives and views are all presented-and therefore skewed-by the narrator. The result of which is an atmosphere of decadence and tension, shot through with the odd moment of beauty and repose;

“It is the house I dreamed of. A house built for sunlight. Evenings, its shadow fall across the water, like the shadow of a plant...we stopped on the terrace, where the September morning spread into the distance, beyond the lake, white in declining autumn light, as though reclining in its own splendour...we will forget each other, my white house in Snagov, you to receive the sun each day through your wide windows, me to put up other walls, just as likely to be forgotten.”

In many ways the above passage, which is the final in the novel, sums-up the novel; an insightful, and at times beautiful, if melancholic exploration of 1930’s Romania as it slowly became engulfed in the chasm of antisemitism, where so many lights were dimmed under the unrelenting darkness of fascism.

Ray says

Romania during the 1920s and 30s. Ominous storm clouds are brewing as Europe slides towards war. Romania has its own fascists and their target is "the other", the Jew, the eternal scapegoat. The narrator of this book is a young Jewish architecture student trying to make a living and a career amidst threats, slaps, kicks and punches. We see him establishing a precarious existence, never quite secure and certain.

I liked the beginning of this book, the way that it conveyed the difficulty of getting a university education as a Jew in Romania between the wars. I understood the ending with its ramblings on anti semitism as an eternal curse and the contrast between stay and eke out a living or leave for the unknown that is Palestine.

The middle of the book lost me. Life in the oilfields left me cold. I didn't really warm to the characters or relate to what they were doing there, it seemed like filler to me. Happy to accept that this is just me, here and now. I literally missed the plot. Who knows, another day I might have seen more in the story.

Hilary Hicklin says

I was fortunate enough to be able to read this book on a long-haul flight and give it the attention it deserves. The journal of Mihail Sebastian, a Romanian Jew, written between the years 1923 and 1934 is a sobering and stimulating read. Written in the shadow of the rise of fascism across Europe it forces you to confront the meaning of prejudice and nationalism, and the consequences of unchecked discrimination.

The title is taken from the 2000 years of persecution endured by the Jews, repeatedly used as scapegoats whenever nations face crises. The author struggles with questions of identity, his own complicity (and by extension that of the whole Jewish people) in their victimisation, the rise of Zionism and whether this is a good or bad thing, and ultimately whether friendship can transcend such divisions. This book, as well as providing an excellent description of Romania in this period, illustrates chillingly the extent to which antisemitism was already rife far beyond Germany's borders facilitating the Final Solution later implemented by the Nazis.

In the early parts of the book Sebastian and his fellow Jewish students suffer daily beatings at the University at the hands of the other students. The number of beatings they endure is almost a matter of pride, and these are suffered on the basis that this too will pass. It does, only to rise up again. Later in the book he passes a group of boys selling newspapers and calling "Death to the Y**s!" Initially this hardly registers with him, so familiar has this cry become, and then he says to himself, "I wonder why it is so easy to call for 'death' in a Romanian street without anyone batting an eyelid. I think though, that death is a pretty serious matter ... If someone set themselves up in the middle of the street to demand, let's say, 'Death to Badgers' I think that would suffice to arouse some surprise among those passing by. Now that I think about it, the problem isn't that three boys can stand at a street corner and cry "Death to the Y**s!" but that the cry goes unobserved and unopposed, like the tinkling of a bell on a tram.

Sebastian's Zionist friends do not convince him of the necessity of a Jewish state, which strikes a particularly poignant note written as this was before the Holocaust. And even then his Jewish friends were debating the right and wrongs of the Palestinian issue, a situation which has not just continued into the present day but got worse and sown the seeds of so many conflicts and terrorist actions.

For anyone interested in the oppression of minorities, antisemitism in particular, and life in pre-WW2 Europe, this is an essential read. Chapter 3 of Part Six is an especially critical chapter in the debate and it is impossible to read this without feeling shocked and saddened by the irrationality and self-justification of antisemitism which is invariably based on myth and propaganda.

I absolutely have to read Sebastian's journal '1935-44: The Fascist Years' now that I have finished this.

Ana-Maria says

Am citit cartea lui Mihail Sebastian cu mult interes și cu multă plăcere. Mi-a plăcut să (re)descopăr multe din neliniștile interbelicului dintr-o altă perspectivă: aceea a evreului persecutat 2000 de ani. Am admirat scriitura de jurnal, care dezvoltă frământările, iubiri și prietenii, care încearcă să explice antisemitismul și revolta evreilor, care vrea să descopere esența sentimentului de a fi evreu sau antisemit pur și simplu, fără?

argumente, c?ci acestea devin doar scuze. O carte despre echilibru ?i ehlibristic?, o carte despre om ?i umanitate, mai pu?in despre politic ?i economic. O carte despre sentimente ?i ra?iuni din spatele lor. Revelator la fiecare pagin?, Sebastian se ?ntrece pe sine ?n ultimele pagini, c?nd explic? ce ?nseamn? antisemitismul ?i cheștiunea evreiasc? ?i adaug? argumente valide despre ineficien?a unor dezbateri ?ntre 2 oameni care au pozi?ii aprioric diferite, bazate pe argumente. El sus?ine c? argumentele, de orice natur? ar fi ele, pot fi comb?tute cu argumente de aceea?i natur?, ?ns? sentimentele nu se vor schimba - credin?a/interpretarea realit??ii de c?tre individ va r?m?ne aceea?i. ?i din ?ntreaga discu?ie ?i, implicit, din ?ntreaga carte, rezult? faptul c?, de?i i se poate nega cuiva (?n particular unui evreu) apartenen?a la un grup, la o idee sau la o genera?ie, acestea nu ?i pot fi retrase doar prin negare. Pentru c? experien?ele rezultate ?n urma acestor rela?ii au aavut efect asupra dezvolt?rii umane a persoanei respective, chiar dac? exist? un ordin special conform c?ruia evreii nu pot avea un post militar de supraveghere la grani??. pentru c? exist? riscul de a tr?da, de?i tr?iesc ?i g?ndesc rom?ne?te de 200 de ani ?n familia lor.

madisson ? says

i don't know how/if i can rate this book? it was very interesting but obviously very politically charged and some of the things the main character/author said i didn't agree with. i don't think i know how to separate opinion from its literary worth? perhaps because the book was written so autobiographically.

what i'm struggling to understand is whether or not that was a good thing? reading about the real life of a jewish person from this time period who was neither zionist nor anti-semite but flitters uncomfortably between both? someone who was questioning their existence their "race"/religion? i don't knooooow, i don't even think i can comment on the structure of the book or the writing style, because it's truly all tethered to the author/main character. however i believe i will think about it for a while (this review has far too many questions, as do i after reading this)

Bonnye Reed says

GNaB I received a free electronic copy of this novel from Netgalley, and Penguin Classics - Other Books in exchange for an honest review. This manuscript was originally published in Romanian in 1934. This 2017 release is the first English language translation of this work.

This is an exceptional story, written as a journal or diary, by a young Romanian Jew as he moves through the late 1920's early 1930's. Sharing these glimpses into the difficult daily life of young Mihail Sebastian as he struggles through his schooling and into a career as an architect is heart wrenching. As the world crumbles around him, there is so much to learn of this time, this place. The first and hardest lesson is absorbing the fact that Mihail expects and accepts the bullying and harassment he encounters at school and on the streets without resentment. Add in the fact that you know what is coming for this community, this country, this young man, For Two Thousand Years can break your heart.

There is a lot out there to read in an effort to understand about World War II from the aspect of Europeans who suffered through these hard times. I have not found a great deal about Romania written by Romanians. I was most pleased to find this treasure. It will go into my history bookcase to read again at leisure. Thank you, Other Books, for bringing this work into our world. With more understanding of what folded our world into World War II perhaps we can back up and avoid WWII.

originally published in 1934 first time in English is edition
published by Other Books on Sept 12, 2017
