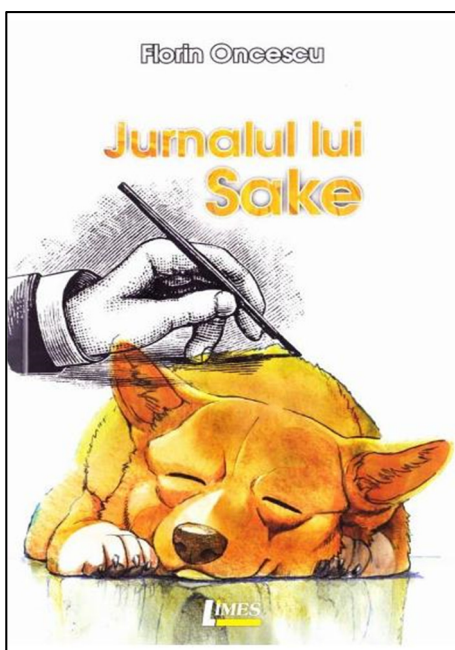


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Florin Oncescu, *Jurnalul lui Sake* [*Sake's Diary*]. Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 2017, 224 p.

Florin Oncescu's most recently published novel, *Jurnalul lui Sake* [*Sake's Diary*], is a delightful and humorous piece of writing that playfully thematizes contemporary issues such as the complex articulations of relocation and bicultural identities. Florin Oncescu is a prominent and idiosyncratic contemporary Romanian writer, who was born in 1960 in Constanța. He has graduated from Polytechnic University of Bucharest in 1985 and permanently moved to Canada in 1995. He has been living in Montréal ever since, with short periods spent in the United States. Nevertheless, he is a well-known and active writer in the Romanian literary landscape. Florin Oncescu has published several volumes of fiction so far: *Dispoziție depresivă* (Ramuri, Craiova, 1994), *La umbra unui enciclopedist* (Omniscop, Craiova, 1999), *Întoarcerea* (Ramuri, Craiova, 2003), *Ilustrate din America* (Limes, Cluj-Napoca, 2007). He is a member of the Romanian Writers' Union and regularly publishes in *Pagini românești*.



Jurnalul lui Sake [*Sake's Diary*] is a postmodern narrative journey which unconventionally traces the convolutions of shifting identities and cultural pluralism by focusing on the life of a Romanian couple living in Canada, Sorin, an engineer who also happens to be a writer, and his wife, Cristina. The novel displays autobiographic traces since Florin Oncescu, as well as his protagonist, Sorin, emigrated to Canada, settled in Montréal and is both an engineer and writer. Sorin and Cristina bought Sake, who had been born at a dog breeding facility in Quebec

and integrated him into their family. Surprisingly, Sake experiences the process of acculturation which generally affects immigrants: he has to learn commands in Romanian. When Sake starts writing his diary, he confesses that "*When I started writing in Romania, I was born for the second time*" (17).¹ Sake's discourse

¹ "Când am început să scriu în limba română, eu m-am născut a doua oară." (All quotations have been translated by Monika Koşa)

encompasses a rich profusion of characters and life situations and is pervaded by intertextual references, popular culture elements, ironical instances and pastiche.

The first part of the book is told almost entirely from the perspective of the sagacious dog-narrator, Sake. Its digressive narration covers topics ranging from Sorin's daily routine, the farcicality behind literary associations, the dog community from Montréal, household gossips to its own existential crises. The ending paragraph from Sake's diary is notable considering that Sake's final words are an artistic legacy stressing its significant role within the narrative discourse: "*Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, both on horseback-the first, on the mare named Rocinante, the other, on a donkey-, pass through a village. A small dog starts barking at them, frightening Sancho. Don Quixote reassures Sancho: "Sancho, it's good that it's barking at us. It means we're advancing!"*" (104).²

Sake's conscious narration voices the detailed observation and interrogation of human behaviour and the Romanian community's everyday practices. Similarly to Julian Barnes' woodworm-narrator from *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, who narrates the alternative version of Noah's Ark in the first chapter of the book, Sake's stories wittily challenge the idea of a single truth and reliable narrator. Employing an animal-narrator, besides being a metafictional play, exonerates the actual author from culpability for criticizing human behav-

our and foolish societal conventions. The anthropomorphic Sake destabilizes traditional forms of narration and heightens the perplexity effect experienced by the readers.

The novel is divided into several unnumbered chapters such as: "Jurnalul lui Sake" [Sake's Diary], "Vedere din Franța" [Postcard from France], "Prizonier în librărie" [Prisoner in the library], "Petrece-re cu vin roșu și ciocolată Lindt" [Party with red wine and Lindt chocolate] or "Trattoria lui Antonio" [Antonio's Trattoria]. Each chapter title refers to a key-element from the narrative episodes. Thematically, the novel can be divided into two main parts. In the first part, the narratorial focus is on Romanian born intellectuals (mostly writers) and their life in Canada and on the life of the dog community from Sake's neighborhood. The second part is almost a distinct omniscient narrative in which the reader glimpses into Sorin's adventures in different parts of the world: Mexico, Montréal, Naples, America, Constanța, Texas, Switzerland, Havana and rural Romania.

The narrative opens with glimpses into Sorin's everyday life as he struggles to fit into the writers' community in Montréal. As the stories unfold, the narrative perspective shifts from Sake's first-person narration to an omniscient third-person narrator who briefly chronicles Sake's life story employing free indirect discourse. The frequent narrative shifts are deliberately self-referential in a postmodern fashion to the extent that the overlapping voices become a permanent echo of the representational crisis which characterizes contemporary fiction. Nevertheless, Florin Onescu opts to mark with italics fragments from Sake's diary, thus distin-

² *Don Quijote și Sancho Panza, amândoi călare-primul, pe iapa numită Rocinanta, al doilea, pe un măgar-, trec printr-un sat. Un câine mic începe să-i latre, îspăimântându-l pe Sancho. Don Quijote îl liniștește: „Sancho, e bine că ne latră. Înseamnă că înaintăm!”*

guishing Sake's voice from the third-person narrator's comments.

Sake's trenchant remarks are, perhaps, the novel's greatest achievement in terms of content and style: Sake "bites" the Romanian writers' community in Montréal in a lucid, yet humorous manner and satirizes preposterous attitudes and situations. For instance, Sake ridicules the endless disputes on the language Romanian writers in Canada should write in, the long discussion on whether to exclude a young poet from the writers' association due to lack of academic language in his poetry, the conflictual relationship between two literary associations (The First Association of Writers and The Other Association of Writers), or "sapiential literature" (47) writers. These ones self-consciously create long, complicated, meaningless sentences in order to seem erudite. Another target of Sake's satire is the obsession to measure literary success in terms of quantity, not quality. Sake's style oscillates between mockery and humorous transpositions of popular adages and excerpts from established intellectuals or artists. A notable example is the parodic Pekingese Confucius and his aphorism: "*life goes on*" (37), "*history repeats itself, only its victims change*" (45)³ or "*the good ones go first*" (39)⁴.

Another highlight of the book is the humorous references to Romanian culture and the vivid insights into the rich linguistic and social practices of rural communities. The narration is replete with specific Romanian local specialties, such as sponge cake, meatloaf or soup made of lamb bread. Mihai Eminescu,

Romania's national poet, or Florin Piersic, one of the most popular contemporary Romanian actors, are also mentioned in Sake's narration. Political allusions are inspired from real-life events. For instance, the narrator parodies Victor Ponta, whom he refers to as "Doctor Ponta"⁵.

As the focus shifts to Sorin's return to his native place, the readers enter the portals of a vibrant rustic world. The villagers' vivid gossip, reminiscent of the oral tradition, captures the authentic rural life, uncontaminated by the technological advancements of the twenty-first century. Instead of accentuating the primitivism of customs and rural traditions, Florin Oncescu's fiction reproduces and celebrates the genuine spectacle of pastoral way of life. Meanwhile, Sake disappears entirely from the narrative discourse and the focus stays entirely on Sorin's experiences in different parts of the world.

The novel ends on a cheerful note as the readers get a glimpse of Sorin at a TV show where he is expected to share his opinions on the Writers' Association. The open ending suggests that the story never ends; Sorin will eventually set out on new adventures and Sake may return to Quebec from Constanța to "bite" once again the Romanian writers' quotidian reality and (mis)adventures. Abounding in intertextual references, pastiche, metafictional tropes, ironies and fascinating storytelling modes, *Sake's Diary* is a truly idiosyncratic piece of writing which defies and resists normative forms of cate-

³ „istoria se repetă, doar victimele ei se schimbă”

⁴ „cei buni se duc primii”

⁵ A Romanian politician accused of having plagiarized his doctoral thesis. He was about to win the 2014 presidential elections against Klaus Iohannis.

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gorization and is an excellent illustration of the Romanian postmodern novel. Florin Oncescu's unfamiliar, yet extraordinary fabulation, which challenges representation and transgresses narra-

tive norms, is filled with eccentric elements and marvelous narrators who ultimately render the fluctuating figurations of nomadic identities.

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