

Antoni Libera  
Madame  
Translated by Agnieszka Kolakowska  
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### **Freedom of Speech (in French)**

These days in Poland, if you hear a fellow citizen sing praises of the West while condemning their own homeland, you either cast them a disapproving glance, or you join in the conversation, and tell them stories of your recent trips abroad to countries that always end up offering more than Poland ever will. It is, then, quite astounding to think that the freedom of speech, and the policy of open borders, especially within the European Union, is a relatively new phenomenon in Poland, or in any other of its post-communist neighboring countries. Antoni Libera's brilliant novel titled *Madame*, set in communist-dominated Warsaw of the 1960s, reminds us of Poland's history of repression through the intimate narrative of a teenage boy longing for the love of Madame, his French teacher.

The unnamed narrator is a senior in high school who grew up listening to Radio Free Europe. He is witty, well-read, and speaks fluent French, at his parents' insistence. His journey of self-discovery begins when he puts on a school play, based on the writings of Shakespeare and Beckett, among others. The problem is that the play is condemned by the school authorities, and the boy gets accused of "worshipping the West." That he falls for Madame, the beautiful and mysterious new principal and French teacher, comes as no surprise since all the male students share their sexual fantasies about her. However, the narrator chooses a tactic more original than his peers: "a kind of game in which words acquired a plurality of meanings and also a new strength." He composes essays in French in which he alludes to his feelings, and in class, he challenges Madame to verbal duels so creatively that no one else seems to notice. But passion has no limits. The boy sets on a research-spying expedition about Madame, an expedition that eventually leads to revelations of unexpected truths.

What is more, the novel itself transforms itself from a simple unrequited love story to a political statement against the Soviet Union's repression of Poland. The narrator's portrayal of the Soviet Union as the best, most caring nation in the world, ready to make sacrifices for Poland, is in fact a clever mockery of its propaganda. The teaching of French, a language of the West, becomes an act of rebellion, and France, located behind the Iron Curtain, referred to as "a hostile power," is, to the narrator as well as many other Poles, a symbol of a better life, of true freedom. Those who want that better life—French teachers, for example—are confronted with choices, both political and personal, that can dehumanize, or even destroy them. Amongst those choices, our narrator, who first thinks he was born too late, because the "fascinating times, extraordinary events, exceptional people" all belong to the past, finds that everyone, including himself, can do something fascinating, extraordinary and exceptional in times of limited possibilities.

Just as Madame captivates the narrator, Libera's writing captivates the reader. This coming-of-age novel seduces us with the power of education, literature, art and language to reflect who we are. Most importantly, the narrator's romantic obsession with

an older woman leads him to a realization about how to live in a state of repression while maintaining a spiritually liberated life.