



# Street Without a Name: Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria

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## **Street Without a Name: Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria** Kapka Kassabova

Kassabova was born in Sofia, Bulgaria and grew up under the drab, muddy, grey mantle of one of communism's most mindlessly authoritarian regimes. Escaping with her family as soon as possible after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, she lived in Britain, New Zealand, and Argentina, and several other places. But when Bulgaria was formally inducted to the European Union she decided it was time to return to the home she had spent most of her life trying to escape. What she found was a country languishing under the strain of transition. This two-part memoir of Kapka's childhood and return explains life on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

## **Street Without a Name: Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria Details**

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Author : Kapka Kassabova

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# From Reader Review *Street Without a Name: Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria* for online ebook

## Dominique Van Hoesel says

'We were living inside George Orwell's 1984 but we didn't know it because it was on the list of banned books'.

As a 'Western European', my knowledge about living under a communist regime was based on the limited education on this topic during high school. This book has been an eye-opener, told by someone that has been on both sides of the fence. Funny anecdotes are interspersed by troubled stories and make up for a read that keeps you entertained throughout the book. I'm certainly interested in reading more books from this author, especially a 'Border: a journey to the edge of Europe'.

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## Emma Deploras Goodreads Censorship says

Kapka Kassabova grew up in Bulgaria under the Communist regime, immigrating to New Zealand in 1991, at the age of 19. In the years after her departure, she returned to the country several times to visit older relatives and to sightsee. The first part of this book is a solid 4-star memoir about her childhood; the rest documents her travels and earns 2.5 or 3 stars. Unfortunately, the travel section is the longer, so I'm rounding down.

The memoir immediately captured my attention with stories of life amidst hardship. Although Kassabova's parents were well-educated, the family lived in two rooms in a shoddily constructed concrete apartment building, surrounded by mud and thousands of other, identical buildings; the chance to buy anything new was so rare and even dangerous (when shoppers physically fought over merchandise) that the author's mother had a breakdown on a visit to a Dutch department store; and interactions with anyone from the other side of the Iron Curtain were fraught, as they truly came from different worlds. One escape was music; in a twist of irony, as a teenager Kassabova enjoyed protest music from the West. The censors allowed it through because the lyrics raged against the capitalist machine, not realizing that teens reversed the meaning, raging instead against the only machine they knew.

The writing is clear, descriptive, and a little self-deprecating, and so combined with interesting material, the first section succeeds. But then we get to the travel. Kassabova initially presents her trip in 2006 as a return to Bulgaria after many years away, but it soon becomes clear that she has traveled in the country as an adult on several occasions, and she splices these trips together, cutting back and forth between different visits to the same or nearby places, which is disorienting.

There doesn't seem to be much direction to Kassabova's travel; the organization of this section felt scattershot, and the reader gets little sense of why we should be interested in these particular places. I'm not sure what the author was looking for on this trip, but don't believe she found it; the whole book is rather melancholy. Certainly Bulgaria doesn't seem to have improved much with the fall of communism; the overall picture Kassabova paints is one of foreign investors getting rich while regular people struggle to get by without a safety net and smaller towns continue to decay. But I was interested to read about how the country has changed, as well as a bit of its earlier history, and the author's conversations with the people she meets are often entertaining.

Ultimately, this one is a cautious recommend: certainly worth reading if you are interested in the subject matter, but not the first book I would urge on an armchair traveler.

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## **Castaway says**

Street Without A Name by Kapka Kassabova

A must-read for anyone interested in Bulgaria, Street Without A Name tracks the emotional and physical journeys experienced by the author as she revisits the land of her birth soon after its entry to the European Union.

Glimpses into her childhood and teens years under communist rule are written with passion but never sentimentality against a backdrop of cuttingly outlined history. We see both the big picture and the small one: a forced exodus described by the government as a holiday at the time; detailed visits to loved grandparents repeated at intervals until death intervenes.

For me, the book has a particular fascination as some of the descriptions of how people lived 'back then', could almost have been written today. Communism ended in 1989; Bulgaria entered the EU in 2007 but in some respects, only the storefront has changed.

Kapka Kassabova's Street Without A Name is a roller coaster of a read, a true tour de force and a history lesson all in one.

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## **Thomas says**

This book is part autobiographic and part travel. The author grew up in communist Bulgaria and left, along with her family, after the fall of communism. The first third of the book is about what it was like to grow up in communist Bulgaria. The rest of the book is about how capitalism has affected Bulgaria, told through a series of return visits over the years, visiting family and friends. She writes about poverty, corruption and change, some of it good, and some of it very depressing.

I enjoyed reading it and give it 4 out of 5 stars.

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## **Pei Pei says**

The best part of this book was the fact that the author grew up in the neighborhood I live in, so I recognized many of the streets and local landmarks she references (hey, there's a photo of our McDonald's!). Other than this novelty factor, though, this book really paled in comparison to other Bulgarian books I've read (and international coming-of-age stories in general - Persepolis comes to mind as a similar story but is far better), not only in quality of writing but also, ironically, in giving a compelling portrayal of Bulgaria and the Balkan region. The frequent and direct comparisons to Orwell's 1984 were heavy handed and sounded trite and adolescent (my Bulgarian 10th graders who just finished reading 1984 could pick apart some of the flawed parallels in a heartbeat), reducing this complex country and people into a kind of archetype, and while I did like some of the stories surrounding Kassabova's education in the French lycee in Sofia and the subsequent



## **Rositsa Zlatilova says**

Street Without a Name is a pure memoir book.

The first half of it reads easily, not to say that you flow through the pages. It is an interesting sneak in how a young, also obviously quite switch-on, person felt about the surrounding environment in the 1980-90s, on the threshold of the collapse of the communist regime.

The second part of the book is another story, though; not to say that it's nowhere near my literary taste. Partly the reason might be because I am Bulgarian and have basic knowledge of our history, which is the main topic in this second half.

Unfortunately, I didn't see an in-depth interpretation of the present through the prism of the past, which seems to have been the author's initial idea. To me the reason for this failure is Kassabova's inclination to criticize everything Bulgarian. This, on its side, created the unpleasant feeling of an outsider - who used to be part of that same environment - and just because is not anymore, looks at it with an eye of superiority. We all have seen enough of this already.

The Balkan sulkiness, which every now and then the author points out as a main reason for Bulgaria's misfortunes - not that she is wrong - is deeply incarnated in her writing style. This felt unfair.

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## **KnijenZadnik says**

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## **Tatjana Bitzakidis says**

Wonderful book, would recommend it to anyone who emigrated from the Eastern to the Western Europe. For all of us a bit 'lost in translation'. For all of us reconciling memories from the country we were born into the countries where we live now. Where neither country is quite that 'perfect fit'... When answer to the question 'Where are you from?' warrants a bit longer answer than just a single word...

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## **Alex Kay says**

### **A wonderfully controversial read**

A have a lot of common themes in my life with the author of the book but I am older, so a bit further down the road. My road started in the Soviet Union, right in the heart of that failed system, and after 13 years in the West it brought me to Bulgaria, which I am now enjoying very much. This book is very well written, a little bit naive and generally is a very enjoyable read that added yet another dimension to my life's experiences.

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## **Ilona Lalova says**

The book is very engaging, especially for those of us who lived through that period in communist and post-communist Bulgaria. The first part is amazing, it reflects to the tiniest details the absurdity of everyday life during the 70s and 80s. It made me cry more than a few times. The second part is definitely engaging too, even though I felt it was a little rushed and forced at times. I like Kapka Kassabova's sense of humor even though I think some of its beauty was lost in the translation.

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## **Francis says**

I'd give this book 3 1/2 stars.

"Street With No Name" is a very interesting and very personal memoir of Kapka Kassabova's childhood in Bulgaria, and a travelogue chronicling several return trips to visit relatives and discuss the sights. The author appears to have also written a travel guidebook, probably during those same trips, and this book reads more like a diary of those trips. The first part mostly describes her growing up in Sofia, discussing her life in school, various activities such as the Pioneer groups (somewhat similar to the Boy/Girl Scouts), and contrasting the deprivations of life in socialist Bulgaria with the luxuries of the West (brought into sober focus by her parents' trips to the Netherlands and a visit by some Dutch colleagues). She also discusses her coming of age, getting into a French-language high school, and her family's eventual exodus to New Zealand.

The second half of the book chronicles her trips throughout Bulgaria; the chronology is sometimes a bit unclear, since there are at least three trips interwoven, some to different regions of Bulgaria, and with multiple visits to her aging relatives. She covers most of the major regions of Bulgaria, and her anecdotes include very vivid, slice-of-life interactions with local people, highlighting their conditions, attitudes, and (sometimes) prejudices. While a bit non-linear, I felt this part actually captured quite well the odd mixture of nostalgia and disorientation that one gets when revisiting a place that is full of memories from several trips but that has changed dramatically each time.

Kapka does manage to work in a great many of the large and small cultural highlights of Bulgaria. She discusses most of the major regions, has some discussion of food, works in many significant historical events of Bulgaria (e.g., the 500 years under the Turks, saving its Jews from the Nazis during World War II, the forcible renaming of Turks in the mid-80s) as well as many cultural details (the wedding music of Ivo Papasov, pop-folk/chalga/silicone divas, the fear that air currents will make you sick; I don't think she managed to work in the one about how women shouldn't sit on concrete because of the fear that their ovaries will freeze, however). The descriptions of the horrors of public toilets was particularly graphic, and not (at all!) exaggerated. Similarly, the descriptions of maniacal taxi-driver speeding and perilous potholes is spot-on (I personally have flown down Tsarigradsko Shousse in a taxi at over 100 MPH and feared for my life similarly).

My reaction to this book is that it struck me as very Bulgarian, in several senses that I shall attempt to explain. It is fairly typical for Bulgarians to exaggerate a certain amount when describing a situation: if something happened twice, they will usually say it happened four times; if six times, they will often say 100.

Recipients of such statements tend to take this into account when interpreting the statements. Thus, when I retold several of the anecdotes to a Bulgarian who grew up around the same time in the same places, they were met with some skepticism (e.g., she thought that Kapka's father being unable to find a store to buy potatoes in the summer in Bansko was more likely due to his unfamiliarity with the town), and she found the story of Kapka's mother being overcome by the luxury of a Dutch bathroom similarly difficult to swallow.

The author spends a rather significant part of the time on the cultural injustice of the ethnic minorities being forced to change their names to Bulgarian ones in order to "assimilate" them, though she focuses a lot on the Turks, and I think rather less so on the Roma (Gypsies), who suffer at least as much discrimination in Bulgaria and worse conditions. Ethnic identity is a far more prominent (and complex) part of Balkan society than in modern America, in my opinion. For instance, as a Chinese-American watching the Olympics in Bulgaria once, I was assumed to be rooting for the Chinese team. Also, perhaps anomalously, one of the most patriotic Bulgarians I know is a Bulgarian Turk whom I believe was alive during the time of the renaming.

The one thing that I found rather hard to stomach about this book was the relentless undercurrent of pretentious self-loathing; the author takes significant pains to highlight the deprivations of the past and the grim aspects of the present. For instance, she spends a fair amount of time depicting Englishmen and the like as slaving, leering, greedy exploiters, ready to pounce on cheap Bulgarian properties (or, sometimes, her). This is also very Bulgarian, in the sense of perceiving themselves as "being at the mercy of the Great Powers". It would be naive and rosy not to acknowledge the fact that the country is wracked with corruption, gangsters (mutri), and so forth, but she likes to take certain facts and spin them into a narrative of backwardness. For instance, she begins with an anecdote about landing at the "worst-named airport in the world, Airpost Vrazhdebna (=Hostile)" and juxtaposing this discussion with a description of some Germans (who represent the modern, progressive West that Bulgaria strives to emulate). But there is a reasonable explanation, which is that it was built in the village of Vrazhdebna on the outskirts of Sofia (apparently that name comes from when that village was inherited by Bogomil heretics). Furthermore, it seems to me like a rather appropriate name from a superstitious point of view: an airport is a place that is perceived to be fraught with danger and risk (and, having flown in a Balkan Air Tupolev TU-154 out of that airport once, I can fully understand why). So, it seems appropriate that to ward off the threat of evil spirits and happenings, the airport has a powerful, warding name.

In any case, I found this book overall very interesting and informative. She makes a disclaimer up front that everything is true, as she remembers it, but explicitly disclaims any pretense of objectivity. Once, when a Bulgarian I know was dismissing the news reports we were watching about goings-on in the former Yugoslavia as "all lies", I tried to ask how one can ever know what the truth is if all the news you ever get is lies....she explained that her way (which I gathered was a common conceptualization of "truth" in the Balkans) was to listen to it all and then look in your heart to figure out what the truth really is. I feel that I should view the narrative presented in this book as having been filtered through this conceptualization of "truth". The material in this book is a very valuable source but I think it needs to be read and understood in context with other sources and experiences to gain a fuller picture of the history and culture of Bulgaria.

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### **Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says**

If Ireland has Frank McCourt's "Angela's Ashes," Bulgaria has this by Ms. Kapka Kassabova. She was born in Sofia, Bulgaria in 1973 and grew up amidst the hardships of a communist country controlled by a totalitarian regime. At the age of 16 her family managed to emigrate to New Zealand. She did some more



travelling before finally settling in Edinburgh, Scotland. Written with exceptional poignancy and wry humor, You'll learn more about Bulgaria reading this than actually going there and looking around.

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### **Humera says**

Really enjoyed this trip through Bulgaria.

The author gives a fantastic tour of her country, in a writing style that is easy to read, yet full of emotion and pathos.

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### **Daisy says**

Memoir, history book, travelogue: this book is written with clarity, honesty, sentiment (not sentimentality), and humor. It's beautifully-written. The family stories are touching. The history portions scratch the surface of huge gaps in my knowledge. And the sections devoted to Kassabova's country of Bulgaria had me googling images of almost every place she mentions. In fact it would be nice if there were a map in this book for easy reference.

*Between Hotel Drustur and the Golden Dobrudzha, I have walked exactly five minutes and twenty-five years. And let's face it: since arriving a few weeks ago, I haven't been myself. A few weeks alone in the country of your childhood wrecks havoc on your imported adult personality. p. 302-3*

*I am going now, and I know never to disturb the natural laws of that country where the people we used to be stroll along the fault lines of a white-cliffed town, eating vanilla ice cream in the slightly otherworldly September light. p. 296*

*1979 was also the year after the assassination by State Security of the dissident writer Georgi Markov in London with a poison-tipped umbrella--Bulgaria's main claim to fame in the last century, if we don't count weightlifters with hairy backs. But that year I was preoccupied by a far more momentous event: the kindergarten summer camp. p. 24*

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