

Ma's Dictionary: Straddling the Social Class Divide, by Milan Kovacovic

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Ma's Dictionary is a personal as well as documentary **memoir** about an improbable life journey through radically different sectors of society—from the “lowest” to the “highest”... *and back*—in France, Slovakia, and the United States. The manuscript itself has a long and unusual French-English bilingual history, with numerous public readings since its inception and several chapters receiving literary awards, most notably from the Minnesota State Arts Board. The book is a *Publishers Weekly* Staff Pick for “Best Read of the Year” and has been selected by the Library of Congress for its permanent collection.

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"The unexamined life is not worth living" (Socrates)

"The unrecorded life is not worth examining" (Emerson)

"Everyone who reaches the age of fifty should set aside two or three weekends to write down their life story"
(Bill Clinton, author of *My Life*)

"Raconte-nous pas ta vie!" ("We don't wanna hear your life story!"), a common French saying

Dear Reader,

Every life, even the seemingly most sheltered or uneventful, is an epic encounter with destiny, deserving to be recorded. That said, I don't know whether or not you'll wanna hear my story. All I know is it took me more than three weekends to write it down...

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Synopsis: Mother and Son, an Odyssey

My *family*, if one can call it that, was too dislocated and too poor to establish a household of its own. So I grew up in other people's homes, until the age of sixteen.

I was born in 1942 in rural Normandy, where my parents had been employed for more than a decade as foreign guest workers. My father, a laborer, died there of cancer when I was eighteen months old, in the midst of war and Nazi occupation. Meanwhile my sisters Olga and Eva—nine and six years older than me—were being raised since infancy by relatives, hundreds of miles away from us in my parents' native village in Slovakia.

In 1946, when rail travel to Eastern Europe was finally restored, my mother tried to restart her life by moving back to her homeland so she could be with her three children, two of whom no longer remembered her. But her resettlement plans foundered. Soon after our arrival in Slovakia, our family was split up again. My mother and I went back to France and remained there another ten years. Then, just before I turned fourteen, we emigrated to America. My sisters stayed behind in Europe, though in different countries.

Following our failed reinstallation among our kin in Slovakia, Olga, at thirteen, had reluctantly accompanied us back to France. Faced with the loss of her familiar surroundings and an abrupt transition to a new language and culture at this vulnerable stage in her life, she became more and more estranged from our mother and endured a cruel destiny in Paris.

It had been expected that after some time ten-year-old Eva would also join us in France. Instead, face-to-face contact with her wasn't reestablished until seventeen years later—in part because the communist Iron Curtain soon slammed shut the Eastern half of the continent; in part too because our precarious situation in the West shattered any prospect that our family would ever reunite. Maman worked as a live-in domestic and therefore could not raise us herself.

That's why I spent the first ten years of my life in a boarding arrangement with an elderly, infirm, indigent peasant couple in a village in Normandy. I became strongly attached to my guardians and to our "primitive" way of life that had scarcely evolved in centuries. At the same time, as a frequent visitor to my mother's place of employment, I often crossed the class divide into the world of the *haute bourgeoisie*. Later, between the ages of ten and fourteen, I even became a direct beneficiary of the schooling prerogatives and other amenities of that milieu, including domicile in the mansion of her new employers, the Kapferers, at 64 Avenue Henri-Martin, one of the most prestigious addresses in Paris's exclusive 16th District. Through observation and instinct, my uneducated but talented mother had become a valued practitioner of French cuisine, and I, her homeless son, was adopted as an extra member in a household of twelve that included a domestic of six: Cook, chamber maid, concierge/housekeeper couple, laundress, British au-pairs.

My upbringing thus took place at opposite extremes of the social scale. Against all odds, I was headed for a promising future by the time I reached adolescence, thanks to the support and hospitality of the Kapferers, complemented by the thoughtfulness of their cosmopolitan daughter Martine Wildenstein, who loved Maman's cooking and often visited for lunch—the main meal of the day—during her family's extended stays in Paris for the horse racing season. As an annual rite, she made me the recipient of her son Alec's hand-me-down wardrobe. He was one year older than I, and heir, with his younger brother Guy, to the world's preeminent art dealing dynasty. His expensive suits, ties, and other fine clothes fit me just right. Though destitute and *sans famille*, I easily passed for a *petit Monsieur*.

As if to usher in this radical transformation, I also received at age ten an all-expense national scholarship from the French government, to attend an "elite" public boarding school in suburban Paris. My placement on this unexpected educational path was due solely to the guidance and tutelage of Madame Mercier, my revered teacher for the preceding five years in the village's one-room schoolhouse of twenty-five pupils.

The luck that had brought me this conjunction of personal and institutional support vanished with my mother's stunning decision to emigrate to America, for no apparent reason, when she turned fifty. Past my initial shock and hesitation, I did not oppose her project, though it meant forsaking my school friends and my generous sponsors, plus my beloved Paris: I had inherited her sense of adventure and her recklessness.

Contrary to Maman's deluded imaginings of a "better future" for us in the New World, the move proved disastrous. I fell into a drastic downward spiral for an entire decade, and she permanently. I recovered from my demise only because of a belated intervention by my disappeared surrogate father, the State. However, his reemergence into my life occurred for a less magnanimous reason than previously in France: Conscription, in January 1965, at the start of the Vietnam War.

I ignored my first draft call, but then yielded and wasn't prosecuted. Ironically, the U.S. Army rescued me from my dead-end civilian existence and enabled me to reinvent myself once more. My former good fortune returned after its prolonged lapse. The unfair, arbitrary, capricious ways of the military all played in my favor. I finished my tour of duty with an honorable discharge and a massive case of survivor guilt.

After several other convolutions, my life finally stabilized and I ended up with two marriages, four children, and a teaching career at a university—a miracle of sorts, given that I barely managed to finish high school back in my teens in Chicago. Delinquency, multiple identities, family disintegration, divided attachments, linguistic and cultural uprootings, mutations in modes of living, disordered education, workplace alienation, these are the most salient themes of my journey, with many happy and humorous moments too, and enough good luck to make up for the bad. My mother often shrugged: "Every family have story."

For Book Clubs or Classrooms

Suggested topics of discussion from MA'S DICTIONARY

1. **European and American locales featured in the book.** See list of chapter titles
2. **Emigration / Immigration / Expatriation.** pp. 196-201
3. **Day labor / blue collar / white collar / professional employment.** pp. 94-95; ch. 16 & 17
4. **Archaic European peasant cultures.** ch. 6
5. **Daily life under communism / Slovakia.** pp. 260-261
6. **The upstairs / downstairs world of *haute bourgeoisie* and live-in domestics.** ch. 10 & 11
7. **Autobiographical writing.** pp. 34-35; **The story of the book's bilingual manuscripts.** Unpublished
8. **Rural one-room schoolhouse experience.** ch. 5 & 8; **Boarding school, age 10-14.** ch. 9
9. **American school daze.** ch. 13
10. **Campus Confidential.** ch. 20 & 22
11. **Alcohol.** ch. 7
12. **The Sixties in America; and the heady “pre-9/11-security” days of air travel.** ch. 19
13. **Psychotherapy.** ch. 21
14. **Family dislocation.** ch. 4
15. **Delinquency.** ch. 15
16. **Mutations in modes of living.** pp. 77; 115-116
17. **The Military.** ch. 18
18. **Nursing Homes.** ch. 3
19. **Culinary considerations; and Paris victuals.** ch. 11
20. **Idiosyncrasies of the English language.** ch. 1
21. **Ethnic identity.** ch. 2; **Race relations.** ch. 20
22. **Impact of childhood events on adult life / Jean-Jacques Rousseau.** ch. 8
23. **Small business: The 22nd Street Linoleum and Dinette store,** ch. 14; **Duke Ellington at Fort Dix,** pp. 276-281
24. **Etc.**