



The Fortress

Danielle Trussoni

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"If I had been another woman, I might have been skeptical. But I wasn't another woman. I was a woman ready to be swept away. I was a woman ready for her story to begin. As a writer, story was all that mattered. Rising action, dramatic complication, heroes and villains and dark plots. I believed I was the author of my life, that I controlled the narration."

From their first kiss, twenty-seven-year-old writer Danielle Trussoni is spellbound by a novelist from Bulgaria. The two share a love of jazz and books and travel, passions that intensify their whirlwind romance.

Eight years later, hopeful to renew their marriage, Danielle and her husband move to the south of France, to a picturesque medieval village in the Languedoc. It is here, in a haunted stone fortress built by the Knights Templar, that she comes to understand the dark, subterranean forces that have been following her all along.

While Danielle and her husband eventually part, Danielle's time in the fortress brings precious wisdom about life and love that she could not have learned otherwise. Ultimately, she finds the strength to overcome her illusions, and start again.

An incisive look at romantic love, The Fortress is one woman's fight to understand the complexities of her own heart, told by one of the best writers of her generation.

The Fortress Details

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From Reader Review The Fortress for online ebook

Book Barmy (Bookbarmy.com) says

At first blush, The Fortress may seem like one of those typical memoirs recounting a romantic adventure of a couple finding, buying and fixing up a rundown French villa ~~ but no, it is so much more. More complicated, deep, and especially, more real.

In The Fortress, Ms. Trussoni lays bare the consequences of her impulsive life. Her whirlwind romance in Bulgaria and then purchasing a run-down French villa called La Commanderie. Her husband confounds her with lies and he manipulates Ms. Trussoni into doubting her own sanity. But she hangs on to her rose-colored perception of their love. She refuses to give up, continuing to try and help the often cruel and increasingly psychotic Nikolai -- trying to fix what is, in reality, a collapsing marriage.

The writing is starkly beautiful and Ms. Trussoni strikes a wonderful balance between both the dark and the beautiful sides of their love, their messy and often glamorous life, and over what was versus what is.

"We were both extraordinary and wrecked, naive and experienced, brilliant and stupid, our exceptional parts snapping together as seamlessly as the damaged ones."

And this heartbreaking passage when Ms. Trussoni's mother unearths her hope chest and explains, this was what most young girls born in the 40's or 50's did to prepare and dream about their future marriage.

"It wasn't until later that I understood that I did in fact have a hope chest of my own. Not of wood, not locked up and hidden under a stack of quilts, but a hope chest nonetheless, one filled with dreams about my life. I believed in romance and destiny. I believed in love at first sight. I believed that when I found the right person, time would stop and we would be suspended in a state of endless passion. There was no place in my hope chest for disappointment or failure. There was no place for imperfection or broken promises or compromise. And while my hope chest ideas might have had all the trappings of a good romance, they didn't have the capacity to hold real love."

I gobbled this book, reading it in great gulps -- perhaps everything could work out, maybe some sort of redemption for them both. But The Fortress is a stingily true tale of life -- real, messy and rough around the edges. Finally, there are legal battles, children's welfare at stake, anger, tears and a resolution (of sorts).

Rest assured, despite everything, Ms. Trussoni makes it through. And in the end, this is a love story. You'll have to read The Fortress yourself to discover the happy ending.

An advanced readers copy was provided by Dey Street Books, an imprint of William Morrow.
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Holly says

My interest in memoirs really led me astray here. This was a combination of "lifestyle porn" à la Under the Tuscan Sun or Peter Mayle and a petulant tell-all attempt at self-aggrandizement. She'd be describing (uninterestingly but breathlessly) some incident that was soul crushing and then stop midway and describe

the food she was eating or the design of drapery. (The fact that they lived in a 13th-century fortress must have been more than 50% of the reason she got this book contract.) Reading the summary I assumed that at least Trussoni would bring a feminist perspective to bear on a story of her disastrous marriage. But she hasn't an ounce of feminist consciousness (e.g. not recognizing that her position as the family's breadwinner put her in the traditional position of the "husband" and the power she wielded.)

She made her husband sound so awful that somewhere halfway I suddenly began rooting for him - and reflecting back on each thing she claimed he'd done to rethink it - virtually every "sin" was justifiable or had become so twisted by her telling that I didn't know what to think (nor cared too much). I figured out who he is with a quick Google search: Nikolai Grozni - a well-regarded Bulgarian novelist. (He should write his own book to rebut this, not to get revenge, which is her game, but to tell another truer story.)

The prose wasn't especially interesting - the vocabulary was simple, the sentence cadences never varied, the introspection was paper thin. Of course I'm usually more discriminating and deliberate in my reading choices than this. I have a lot of desk/screen work this week and needed audiobooks for a respite, but this was the only audiobook on my device. So why didn't I just load a couple of good podcasts if I disliked this so much? I guess I wanted to see how big the trainwreck got and how many silly things Trussoni said. (Not that I'm proud of continuing for that reason!)

Liralen says

I was a woman ready to be swept away. I was a woman ready for her story to begin. (12)

A Love Story, says the subtitle, but don't discount that crack running through the cover.

Trussoni was fresh out of another relationship when she fell for Nikolai, a writer and pianist from Bulgaria. Theirs was supposed to be that swept-away-by-love story, and for a while it was. But the cracks showed early—there's a moment when Nikolai reads the journals that Trussoni had told him (directly) were off-limits, and my mind boggled. (As someone who has on and off kept journals, and who has other writing that is better off unexplored...I consider reading one's private writing a break-up-able offense.) There are other moments.

The Fortress stretches across years and across space, moving with the relationship across the US and Europe. Because of this, Trussoni is able to show so much of the framework that built both people and relationship. Nikolai, for example: when they live for a time in Bulgaria, she comes to understand him as something of a hothouse flower, cultivated by his parents to be intelligent and educated and a brilliant pianist but not entirely fit for a world in which he must work hard, a world in which his talents are not widely lauded. She examines her own flaws, too, from the things that made her stay in the relationship to the things that contributed to the cracks in the relationship. And when that relationship collapsed, it did so in spectacular fashion.

I won't spoil the story—better to let it unfold as you read—but I'll say this much: there are moment near the end when I could feel anxiety rising, uncertain as I was how much Trussoni would lose before the end, and then she'd drop in a little hint, just a line or two, to give the reader an idea of how things turned out. I barely noticed the first one, but at the second I paused to go back for the first. It's a complicated enough ending that these 'spoilers' don't tell anywhere near the full story, but their placement is intriguing.

A love story, but not a happily-ever-after.

M says

"I had always believed we were exceptional, but now I saw that we were just your run-of-the-mill egotistical assholes."

Um, whoa. I have a penchant for train-wreck relationship memoirs, but this might be one of the strangest and nastiest divorce narratives I've read yet (well, either this or *Cleaving*). It seems odd to say I "liked it," but it was fascinating and sad.

Jennifer says

Reviewing memoirs is always difficult for me because I feel like I'm judging the author, not just the book, if I didn't appreciate their story.

And, unfortunately, this was a tough one for me.

First, Trussoni reads her own audiobook, which, unless the author is a comedian or actor, is almost always a mistake. It was in this case. She would have been better served by having a professional read her story.

Second, while Trussoni's tale about the dissolution of her second marriage while living abroad in France is compelling, it's also an experience in frustration. She often makes terrible decisions. She is often self-absorbed to the point of ignoring her children's needs. She often justifies her poor decisions by pointing out how much more awful her husband is.

I believe Trussoni is attempting to be honest about how she dealt with her dissolving relationship, and I appreciate that. But, instead of owning those poor choices, she plays the victim, and points out that she simply had no other choices . . . which . . . is . . . not true. When you choose to run away from your problems for a weekend because you need "you time" to have an affair, and you know your husband is unstable and unreliable, don't act surprised when he leaves with your daughter. Yes, I know I sound unsympathetic, but when you leave your children with a man you don't trust, that's a problem. Your children come first. Keep them safe.

Anyhow, that's just one of the frustrating moments, where both of the "adults" were in the wrong. There are plenty of others.

I do think this is an apt portrait of what happens when two selfish, mentally unstable adults find themselves unable to leave a toxic, potentially abusive situation, get counselling, or even get help of any kind, because they both want control of their finances, housing, children, and, ultimately, blame . . . it's an awful story.

I felt the worst for the children, because they truly had no choices, unlike their parents.

Heartbreaking for all involved. An act of frustration to read, because you can't step in and make the adults

begin acting like adults.

*language, sexual situations

Laura Ogrody says

I can't believe this book got such good reviews, I finally quit halfway through, and I almost never do that. I absolutely couldn't stand either one of them, he was so narcissistic and selfish, she so pitiful and clueless. Truly couldn't waste another second in their world. I quit when she was desperate to renew her vows to the man she was repulsed by physically, who had repeatedly lied to her, and was completely absent from their lives, she was a moron!

Harvee says

Does the idea of writing books on your life influence the way you live your life? A question I had while reading this intriguing memoir about the marriage and break-up of two headstrong and complicated individuals.

Christine says

This book is subtitled "a love story" which is not at all true. The author is divorced and has a small child when she meets Nikolai, who is also divorced with a child. They quickly discover they are soul mates. His visa is expired so he has to return to Bulgaria to renew it, convinces her to come along, then they find out he has to stay there 2 years before leaving again. He convinces her to stay in Bulgaria (can't live without her), supported by his parents and she's pregnant. They have a child, he cheats on her, she's dumb, they move to France supposedly to resuscitate their marriage, but that's a disaster and it all goes downhill from there. Because again, she meets another guy and cheats on her husband. You would think she'd figure out that's not the way to start a relationship. Ugh

Marlene Pechura says

Having been familiar with Trussoni's writing [ANGELOLOGY, ANGELOPOLIS, & FALLING THRU EARTH (memoir)] I thought I knew what I was in for when I opened THE FORTRESS. As I read on, I was so completely involved that I almost forgot it was a true story. The reality overwhelms the reader at times especially given the family's idyllic setting but tumultuous life in France. I couldn't help thinking about how her writing life was being affected along the way, her personality as well. I fell in love with Trussoni's style of writing, the fact that she had Wisconsin ties, and eagerly awaited the second book in her Angelology trilogy - then I had the chance to meet her at a local bookstore with my book club. Her physical appearance, demeanor, and almost absent passion for her subject matter disappointed my group and devastated me. So upon seeing this new title out there, I dared to read it to see if she found her self again . . . or discover what happened to her.

Needless to say, I eagerly await the third and final book in the ANGEL trilogy!!!

Doriana Bisegna says

Adam Gopnik while being interviewed said " No one wants to read about a good marriage...but everyone wants to read about a bad marriage". This is that bad marriage and yes I did keep turning those pages faster than you can say divorce! The only problem I had with this book was why the author felt the need to tell us this story. I'm not being critical but rather curious. I don't think I could have ever told the world about my bad marriage unless there was something so rare and different about my situation that may help others. This was not that kind of marriage..bad, yes but different than millions of others that didn't work out...absolutely not!!

Donna Brodie says

One of my favorite pieces of wisdom is from St. Augustine. His words immediately came to mind while reading Danielle Trussoni's true adventures, grand and mis, of love and loss and love again - "The world is a great book. Those that never stir from home read only a page."

As someone who herself has stirred from home (from time to time), I found myself in great and sympathetic company with *The Fortress*. I've sometimes made those wild choices that paid off and other times cost way too much. I've rationalized, regretted and renewed. I am so grateful for Trussoni's honest accounting of the states of mind and emotions unique, I believe, to the female psyche which will cause some of us to throw caution to the wind one moment and demand on the sanctity of the hearth the next.

The Fortress helped me to remember that in the big picture, yes is almost always better than no, even if the outcome is not quite or not at all what you planned on. I was with her all the way. You will be too.

Emmaline Long says

Did not enjoy at all- in fact, it caused me anxiety. The "love story" subtitle is totally misleading- should be called a "hate story". The author fails to acknowledge that there are some deep mental issues happening with her husband, despite recognizing them in other characters mentioned throughout the book. Just because you've spent time in a foreign country doesn't mean your story makes for a great one. Was not at all what I was expecting from the synopsis.

Bill Kupersmith says

An autobiographical memoir ought to be simplest of genres, the author is also usually the narrator & principal character, the other characters are present in the author's memory, & the plot seemingly a simple recounting of what happened in real life. But to a literary analyst, memoir is fiendishly complex. In what sense is Danielle Trussoni, a woman who once attended the University of Iowa MFA program identical with the Danielle Trussoni in this story, who lived in a castle in southern France while married to a Bulgarian novelist named Nikoli & who is telling this story? Is the 1st person narrator the same person as the writer

who once wrote a novel I confess I never finished called *Angelology*? The narrator here mentions its publication & her American book tour, but solely for how those affected her marriage, much to my disappointment because I'd love to know where she got the idea & how she discovered the Book of Enoch & the Watchers. Should you want to fine-tune your literary theory, you can also ask about what theorists term "the implicit author"—the sort of person whose presence you feel behind the book you are actually reading. All four of them, the author, the narrator, the principal subject, & the implicit author, have in common the name Danielle Trussoni.

An Amazon review wondered that Nikoli didn't sue Danielle for slander. Which Nikoli? we wonder. The Bulgarian novelist in real life or the character in *Fortress*. Can a character in a story book sue the author for an unflattering portrait? I'd love to attend the trial Falstaff v. Shakespeare. There is, however a website maintained by Nikoli the novelist & ex-spouse (tho' she's not mentioned) of the author Danielle Trussoni. There's a picture of him wearing a top hat like the one described in *Fortress* that made a line from a song by Taylor Swift come immediately to mind: "Run as fast as you can."

The two principal characters in *Fortress* are a crazy romantic from Wisconsin who encounters a darkly glamorous sexually magnetic Bulgarian., the Heathcliff figure every crazy romantic is eager to meet. It doesn't matter that Danielle already had a child. (We discover later that she's playing faster & looser with her domestic arrangements than she reveals @ 1st.) She gets pregnant & makes the mistake of going to Bulgaria to meet his parents & have the baby. (Her account of a Bulgarian L&D unit is utterly harrowing.) His dealing with the baby's name on her birth certificate reveals straightway that he is a controlling liar. She makes the bigger mistake of marrying him, which means that under the law after they move to France, half of all their property will be his, even tho' he contributes absolutely nothing to their finances. When @ last Danielle wises up (we are introduced to a White Knight, a handsome young Frenchman, as the start of the book), he resorts to blackmail, lying, gas-lighting, even parental abduction, & brings his parents from Bulgaria to try to torment Danielle into giving him custody of their daughter. In short, Nikoli fits every stereotype you ever had about Balkan males. Maybe it's the effect of growing up in places that were once ruled by the Turks. (Nikoli also affects being a magician, a Buddhist mystic, & part vampire, tho' with that "Oil Can Harry" hat, au fond he's just the cheap shallow villain in the melodrama, but unfortunately he really does have the deed to the house.

Although *Fortress* dragged in the middle, I found it quite enchanting, with a heroine we love & suffer with, & a villain whom we want to strangle. The last portion, especially when the White Knight's mother, the White Queen, comes to Danielle's aid, had me wanting to stand up & cheer. So despite many flaws, *Fortress* deserves the whole five stars, even tho' I'm not quite sure which Danielle Trussoni will accept them. Maybe the author of *Angelology*, one of the best fantasy novels I never quite got round to finishing.

Stephanie says

I'm not sure what the point of the book is, except to shake your head throughout and wonder what on earth Trussoni was thinking.

Rachel says

I couldn't put this down. Danielle Trussoni whipped out every ounce of self-actualization and intellect from her holster as she recounted the disintegration of her marriage to Bulgarian dickhead Nikolai Grozni, and their ineffective struggle to turn the relationship around by moving into a little castle in the South of France.

At times, it read like a fiction- I was turning pages so fast, I couldn't believe I was so frantically compelled by somebody's *real life*. What impressed me most is that she has every opportunity to demonize somebody who so royally threw a wrench (fine, buckets full of wrenches) into what should have been a loving family life, and instead, she shares responsibility every step of the way and elucidates her crumbling relationship with tenderness. I was wary in the beginning, ready to prejudge: "How many glasses of grenache in a sunlit courtyard will I have to sit through before I get bored?" "How many passive-aggressive interactions is it going to take before the shit really hits the fan?" "Come on, is the husband really *that bad* of a guy?" Let me tell you, I did not get bored once. The story is never dully repetitive- it only circles back on itself to descend to a new depth of hellaciousness that I, as a single and childless person, have personally never known. And yes, Nikolai truly sucks. Trussoni's power to summon up every demon, skeleton, and ghost in the graveyard of this wreck of a marriage is a force to be reckoned with. What's really something is that I can't even personally relate to her life (I don't even think I share personality traits with her), but I found myself hitched onto her wagon and very content to be there. I think I was actually sweating during the last 100 pages, wondering what other turns the story was going to take before its conclusion. If I had any criticisms to give, it would be that I would have liked to know a little more aftermath, but the story is so strongly centered around the (view spoiler), I can understand why that was not given to us. *The Fortress* isn't just a good memoir: it's a great one. Ya wanna feel a little pain and get really real? Read this.

Review for McLean & Eakin Monday Email 10/8/16:

A romantic at heart and so profoundly intelligent that you wonder how things could have gone so wrong, Danielle Trussoni details her marriage to Bulgarian writer Nikolai Grozni in a memoir that will have you sweatin' long before the story comes to a close. As their whirlwind romance begins to show its dark underbelly after years of ignored red flags and hopes to reclaim the fiery feelings that triggered it all, Danielle and Nikolai attempt to salvage their relationship by moving into a small castle in the south of France- with two children in tow. The fortress was intended to save them, but what this couple didn't realize was that battle could take place within those same stone walls. The self-actualized, humble tone of the author allows us to see the complexities of marriage on such a delicate scale that you can't help but look closely: so closely that the workings of love, with all its interlaced gears and cogs, gets a new mechanical breakdown that will shed light on the relationships you already know (or thought you did). This is a memoir you won't want to miss.
