

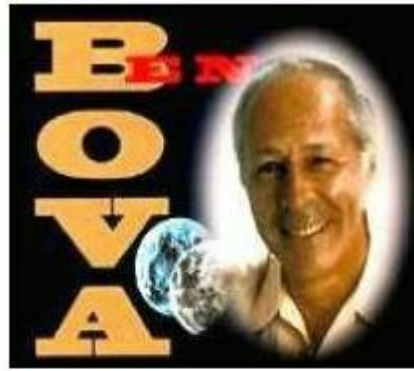
Ben Bova The Cafe Coup The more things change, the more they stay the same. Or do they? Two time travelers will find out for themselves in the latest story from the prolific author of *Mars, Brothers*, and many other novels and works of nonfiction. Paris was not friendly to Americans in the soft springtime of 1922. The French didn't care much for the English, either, and they hated the victorious Germans, of course. I couldn't blame them very much. The Great War had been over for more than three years, yet Paris had still not recovered its gaiety, its light and color, despite the hordes of boisterous German tourists who spent so freely on the boulevards. More likely, because of them. I sat in one of the crowded sidewalk cafes beneath a splendid warm sun, waiting for my lovely wife to show up. Because of all the Germans, I was forced to share my minuscule round table with a tall, gaunt Frenchman who looked me over with suspicious eyes. "You are an American?" he asked, looking down his prominent nose at me. His accent was worse than mine, certainly not Parisian. "No," I answered truthfully. Then I lied, "I'm from New Zealand." It was as far away in distance as my real birthplace was in time. "Ah," he said with an exhalation of breath that was somewhere between a sigh and a snort. "Your countrymen fought well at Gallipoli. Were you there?" "No," I said. "I was too young." That apparently puzzled him. Obviously I was of an age to fight in the Great War. But in fact, I hadn't been born when the British Empire troops were decimated at Gallipoli. I hadn't been born in the twentieth century at all. "Were you in the war?" I asked needlessly. "But certainly. To the very last moment I fought the Boche." "It was a great tragedy." "The Americans betrayed us," he muttered. My brows rose a few millimeters. He was quite tall for a Frenchman, but painfully thin. Half starved. Even his eyes looked hungry. The inflation, of course. It cost a basketful of francs, literally, to buy a loaf of bread. I wondered how he could afford the price of an aperitif. Despite the warm afternoon he had wrapped himself in a shabby old leather coat, worn shiny at the elbows. From what I could see there were hardly any Frenchmen in the cafe; mostly raucous Germans roaring with laughter and heartily pounding on the little tables as they bellowed for more beer. To my amazement, the waiters had learned to speak German. "Wilson," my companion continued bitterly. "He had the gall to speak of Lafayette." "I thought that the American president was the one who arranged the armistice." "Yes, with his fourteen points. Fourteen daggers plunged into the heart of France." "Really?" "The Americans should have entered the war on our side! Instead they sat idly by and watched us bleed to death while their bankers extorted every gram of gold we possessed." "But the Americans had no reason to go to war," I protested mildly. "France needed them! When their pitiful little colonies rebelled against the British lion, France was the only nation to come to their aid. They owe their existence to France, yet when we needed them they turned their backs on us." That was largely my fault, although he didn't know it. I averted the sinking of the *Lusitania* by the German U-boat. It took enormous energies, but my darling wife arranged it so that the *Lusitania* was crawling along at a mere five knots that fateful morning. I convinced Lieutenant Walther Schwieger, skipper of the U-20, that it was safe enough to surface and hold the British liner captive with the deck gun while a boarding party searched for the ammunition that I knew the English had stored aboard her. The entire affair was handled with great tact and honor. No shots were fired, no lives were lost, and the 123 American passengers arrived safely in Liverpool with glowing stories of how correct, how chivalrous, the German U-boat sailors had been. America remained neutral throughout the Great War. Indeed, a good deal of anti-British sentiment swept the United States, especially the midwest, when their newspapers reported that the British were transporting military contraband in secret and thus risking the lives of American passengers. "Well," I said, beckoning to the waiter for two more Pernods, "the war is over and we must face the future as best we can." "Yes," said my companion gloomily. "I agree." One group of burly Germans was being particularly obnoxious, singing

bawdy songs as they waved their beer glasses to and fro, slopping the foaming beer on themselves and their neighboring tables. No one complained. No one dared to say a word. The German army still occupied much of France. My companion's face was white with fury. Yet even he restrained himself. But I noticed that he glanced at the watch on his wrist every few moments, as if he were expecting someone. Or something. If anyone had betrayed France, it was I. The world that I had been born into was a cesspool of violence and hate, crumbling into tribal savagery all across the globe. Only a few oases of safety existed, tucked in remote areas far from the filthy, disease-ridden cities and the swarms of ignorant, vicious monsters who raped and murdered until they themselves were raped and murdered. Once they discovered our solar-powered city, tucked high in the Sierra Oriental, I knew that the end was near. Stupidly, they attacked us, like a wild barbarian horde. We slaughtered them with laser beams and heat-seeking bullets. Instead of driving them away, that only whetted their appetite. Their survivors laid siege to our mountaintop. We laughed, at first, to think their pitiful handful of ragged ignoramuses could overcome our walled city, with its high-tech weaponry and endless energy from the sun. Yet somehow they spread the word to others of their kind. Day after day we watched their numbers grow, a tattered, threadbare pack of rats surrounding us, watching, waiting until their numbers were so huge they could swarm us under despite our weapons. They were united in their bloodlust and their greed. They saw loot and power on our mountaintop and they wanted both. At night I could see their campfires down below us, like the red eyes of rats watching and waiting. Our council was divided. Some urged that we sally out against the besiegers, attack them and drive them away. But it was already too late for that. Their numbers were far too large, and even if we drove them away they would return, now that they knew we existed. Others wanted to flee into space, to leave Earth altogether and build colonies off the planet. We had the technology to build and maintain the solar power satellites, they pointed out. It was only one technological step farther to build habitats in space. But when we put the numbers through a computer analysis, it showed that to build a habitat large enough to house us all permanently would be beyond our current resources -- and we could not enlarge our resource base as long as we were encircled by the barbarians. I had worked on the time translator since my student days. It took enormous energy to move objects through time, far too much for all of us to escape that way. Yet I saw a possibility of hope. If I could find a nexus, a pivotal point in time, perhaps I could change the world. Perhaps I could alter events to such an extent that this miserable world of terror and pain would dissolve, disappear, and a better world replace it. I became obsessed with the possibility. "But you'll destroy this world," my wife gasped, shocked when I finally told her of my scheme. "What of it?" I snapped. "Is this world so delightful that you want it to continue?" She sank wearily onto the lab bench. "What will happen to our families? Our friends? What will happen to us?" "You and I will make the translation. We will live in an earlier, better time." "And the others?" I shrugged. "I don't know. The mathematics isn't clear. But even if they disappear, the world that replaces them in this time will be better than the world we're in now." "Do you really think so?" "We'll make it better!" The fools on the council disagreed, naturally. No one had translated through time, they pointed out. The energy even for a preliminary experiment would be prohibitively high. We needed that energy for our weapons. None of them believed I could change a thing. They weren't afraid that they would be erased from existence, their world line snuffed out like a candle flame. No, in their blind ignorance they insisted that an attempt at time translation would consume so much energy that we would be left defenseless against the besieging savages outside our walls. "The savages will no longer exist," I told them. "None of this world line will exist, once I've made the proper change in the world line." They voted me down. They would rather face the barbarians than give up their existence, even if it meant a better world would replace the one they knew. I accepted their

judgment outwardly. Inwardly I became the most passionate student of history of all time. Feverishly I searched the books and tapes, seeking the nexus, the turning point, the place where I could make the world change for the better. I knew I had only a few months; the savage horde below our mountaintop was growing and stirring. I could hear their murmuring dirge of hate even through the walls of my laboratory, like the growls of a pack of wild beasts. Every day it grew louder, more insistent. It was the war in the middle of the twentieth century that started the world's descent into madness. A man called Adolph Hitler escalated the horror of war to new levels of inhumanity. Not only did he deliberately murder millions of civilian men, women and children; he destroyed his own country, screaming with his last breath that the Aryan race deserved to be wiped out if they could not conquer the world. When I first realized the enormity of Hitler's rage I sat stunned for an entire day. Here was the model, the prototype, for the brutal, cruel, ruthless, sadistic monsters who ranged my world seeking blood. Before Hitler, war was a senseless affront to civilized men and women. Soldiers were tolerated, at best; often despised. They were usually shunned in polite society. After Hitler, war was commonplace, genocide routine, nuclear weapons valued for the megadeaths they could generate. Hitler and all he stood for was the edge of the precipice, the first terrible step into the abyss that my world had plunged into. If I could prevent Hitler from coming to power, perhaps prevent him from ever being born, I might save my world -- or at least erase it and replace it with a better one. For days on end I thought of how I might translate back in time to kill this madman or even prevent his birth. Slowly, however, I began to realize that this single man was not the cause of it all. If Hitler had never been born, someone else would have arisen in Germany after the Great War, someone else would have unified the German people in a lust for revenge against those who had betrayed and defeated them, someone else would have preached Aryan purity and hatred of all other races, someone else would have plunged civilization into World War II. To solve the problem of Hitler I had to go to the root causes of the Nazi program: Germany's defeat in the first world war, the war that was called the Great War by those who lived through it. I had to make Germany win that war. If Germany had won World War I, there would have been no humiliation of the German people, no thirst for revenge, no economic collapse. Hitler would still exist, but he would be a retired soldier, perhaps a peaceful painter or even a minor functionary in the Kaiser's government. There would be no World War II. And so I set my plans to make Germany the victor in the Great War, with the reluctant help of my dear wife. "You would defy the council?" she asked me, shocked when I revealed my determination to her. "Only if you help me," I said. "I won't go unless you go with me." She fully understood that we would never be able to return to our own world. To do so, we would have to bring the components for a translator with us and then assemble it in the early twentieth century. Even if we could do that, where would we find a power source in those primitive years? They were still using horses then. Besides, our world would be gone, vanished, erased from spacetime. "We'll live out our lives in the twentieth century," I told her. "And we'll know that our own time will be far better than it is now." "How can you be sure it will be better?" she asked me softly. I smiled patiently. "There will be no World War II. Europe will be peaceful for the rest of the century. Commerce and art will flourish. Even the Russian communists will join the European federation peacefully, toward the end of the century." "You're certain?" "I've run the analysis on the master computer a dozen times. I'm absolutely certain." "And our own time will be better?" "It has to be. How could it possibly be worse?" She nodded, her beautiful face solemn with the understanding that we were leaving our world forever. Good riddance to it, I thought. But it was the only world we had ever known, and she was not happy to toss it away deliberately and spend the rest of her life in a bygone century. Still, she never hesitated about coming with me. I wouldn't go without her, she knew that. And I knew that she wouldn't let me go unless she came with me. "It's really quite romantic, isn't it?" she

asked me, the night before we left. "What is?" "Translating across time together. Our love will span the centuries." I held her close. "Yes. Across the centuries." Before sunrise the next morning we stole into the laboratory and powered up the translator. No one was on guard, no one was there to try to stop us. The council members were all sleeping, totally unaware that one of their loyal citizens was about to defy their decision. There were no renegades among us, no rebels. We had always accepted the council's decisions and worked together for our mutual survival. Until now. My wife silently took her place on the translator's focal stage while I made the final adjustments to the controls. She looked radiant standing there, her face grave, her golden hair glowing against the darkened laboratory shadows. At last I stepped up beside her. I took her hand@ it was cold with anxiety. I squeezed her hand confidently. "We're going to make a better world," I whispered to her. The last thing I saw was the pink glow of dawn rising over the eastern mountains, framed in the lab's only window. Now, in the Paris of 1922 that I had created, victorious Germany ruled Europe with strict but civilized authority. The Kaiser had been quite lenient with Great Britain; after all, was he not related by blood to the British king? Even France got off relatively lightly, far more lightly than the unlucky Russians. Germany kept Alsace-Lorraine, of course, but took no other territory. France's punishment was mainly financial: Germany demanded huge, crippling reparations. The real humiliation was that France was forced to disarm. The proud French army was reduced to a few regiments and forbidden modern armaments such as tanks and airplanes. The Parisian police force was better equipped. My companion glanced at his watch again. It was the type that the army had issued to its officers, I saw. "Could you tell me the time?" I asked, over the drunken singing of the German tourists. My wife was late, and that was quite unlike her. He paid no attention to me. Staring furiously at the Germans who surrounded us, he suddenly shot to his feet and shouted, "Men of France! How long shall we endure this humiliation?" He was so tall and lean that he looked like a human Eiffel Tower standing among the crowded sidewalk tables. He had a pistol in his hand. One of the waiters was so surprised by his outburst that he dropped his tray. It clattered to the pavement with a crash of shattered glassware. But others were not surprised, I saw. More than a dozen men leaped up and shouted, "Vive La France!" They were all dressed in old army uniforms, as was my companion, beneath his frayed leather coat. They were all armed; a few of them even had rifles. Absolute silence reigned. The Germans stared, dumbfounded. The waiters froze in their tracks. I certainly didn't know what to say or do. My only thought was of my beautiful wife; where was she, why was she late, was there some sort of insurrection going on? Was she safe? "Follow me!" said the tall Frenchman to his armed compatriots. Despite every instinct in me, I struggled to my feet and went along with them. From cafes on both sides of the wide boulevard armed men were striding purposefully toward their leader. He marched straight ahead, right down the middle of the street, looking neither to the right nor left. They formed up behind him, some two or three dozen men. Breathlessly, I followed along. "To the Elysee!" shouted the tall one, striding determinedly on his long legs, never glancing back to see if the others were following him. Then I saw my wife pushing through the curious onlookers thronging the sidewalks. I called to her and she ran to me, blonde and slim and more lovely than anyone in all of spacetime. "What is it?" she asked, as breathless as I. "What's happening?" "Some sort of coup, I think." "They have guns!" "Yes." "We should get inside. If there's shooting --" "No, we'll be all right," I said. "I want to see what's going to happen." It was a coup, all right. But it failed miserably. Apparently the tall one, a fanatical ex-major named de Gaulle, believed that his little band of followers could capture the government. He depended on a certain General Petain, who had the prestige and authority that de Gaulle himself lacked. Petain lost his nerve at the critical moment, however, and abandoned the coup. The police and a detachment of army troops were waiting for the rebels at the Petit Palace; a few shots were exchanged. Before the smoke had

drifted away the rebels had scattered and de Gaulle himself was taken into custody. "He will be charged with treason, I imagine," I said to my darling wife as we sat that evening at the very same sidewalk cafe. The very same table, in fact. "I doubt that they'll give him more than a slap on the wrist," she said. "He seems to be a hero to everyone in Paris." "Not to the Germans," I said. She smiled at me. "The Germans take him as a joke." She understood German perfectly and could eavesdrop on their shouted conversations quite easily. "He is no joke." We both turned to the dark little man sitting at the next table; we were packed in so close that his chair almost touched mine. He was a particularly ugly man, with lank black hair and the swarthy face of a born conspirator. His eyes were small, reptilian, and his upper lip was twisted by a curving scar. "Charles de Gaulle will be the savior of France," he said. He was absolutely serious. Grim, even. "If he's not guillotined for treason," I replied lightly. Yet inwardly I began to tremble. "You were here. You saw how he rallied the men of France." "All two dozen of them," I quipped. He looked at me with angry eyes. "Next time it will be different. We will not rely on cowards and turncoats like Petain. Next time we will take the government and bring all of France under his leadership. Then..." He hesitated, glancing around as if the police might be listening. "Then?" my wife coaxed. He lowered his voice. "Then revenge on Germany and all the those who betrayed us." "You can't be serious." "You'll see. Next time we will win. Next time we will have all of France with us. And then all of Europe. And then, the world." My jaw must have dropped. It was all going to happen anyway. The French would re-arm. Led by a ruthless, fanatical de Gaulle, they would plunge Europe into a second world war. All my efforts were for nothing. The world that we had left would continue to exist -- or be even worse. He turned his reptilian eyes to my lovely wife. Although many of the German women were blonde, she was far more beautiful than any of them. "You are Aryan?" he asked, his tone suddenly menacing. She was nonplussed. "Aryan? I don't understand." "Yes you do," he said, almost hissing the words. "Next time it will go hard on the Aryans. You'll see." I sank my head in my hands and wept openly. THE END



Ben Bova Cafe Coup



About this Title

This eBook was created using ReaderWorks™Standard, produced by OverDrive, Inc.

For more information on ReaderWorks, visit us on the Web at "www.readerworks.com"