

GAD-CYKMAN, Avital. Memory-Like Flash Fiction in *Light Reflections Over Blues: Short Prose*. Edmonds: Ravenna Press, 2022, 162 pp.

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In the salty waters of the Dead sea, that is where Avital Gad-Cykman's second published book of flash fiction starts. *Light Reflection Over Blues: Short Prose*, published in 2022 by Ravenna Press, takes the reader to many corners of the earth where both the prosaic and the unlikely, or even the surreal, take place. There is almost always a war, the threat of it, or the fallout of the Holocaust in the background. And there is also loss, and love, and the pervading gloom of losing loved ones too soon. However, gloom never holds for too long – life gets in the way, and with it comes the exciting and the oftentimes uncanny quality of interaction with people, with the material world, and the seductive pull of joy, which manifests even at times when it seems like there is no space for it.

Avital Gad-Cykman was born and grew up in Israel and has lived in Brazil for over twenty years. She holds a PhD and a Master's degree in literature and specializes in research on trauma, gender, and minorities literature. Gad-Cykman is also the author of *Life In, Life Out*, published in 2014 by Ravena Press, another great work of flash fiction, a genre whose known works and writers range from Aesop's Fables, Nasiruddin's Sufi stories, to Kate Chopin's flash fictions.

In *Light Reflection Over Blues*, the book's 54 stories allow the reader to touch on and be touched by events that, in their brevity, produce an image-like imprint in one's mind, like a moving memory. It becomes almost impossible not to carry around the pain of a teenager who has lost her dear father and mother in the gap of very few years, the heartbreak of a teenager who is already too hurt for her own good, or even the salty skin of a child who knows the comfort and safety of having a mother home who will, upon the child's return from the sea, have prepared dinner.

The stories, although they may be read separately, are chronologically ordered, so that the characters are not (necessarily) the same ones, but their ages increase as the

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book progresses. The first story, “Water”, is a collection of water-related memories and stories. “I am three” (1), says one of the narrators who is describing the sea-water lessons her loving father is giving her. Then she is five, then seven. In four paragraphs (or fourteen lines), the narrator covers the span of five years and the reader does not feel like anything is missing. What matters is told and the impact of the story is intact. When a wave swallows the little girl, the father pulls her out by the hair, despite the lessons she has been given. “He can’t take the chance” (2). The reader sighs in relief.

The particularity of flash fiction seems to be that of condensing time, events, and feelings into much fewer words than, for instance, in a short story or a novel. It is, after all, a short short story. The arc of exposition, climax, and denouement commits the reader to a ride that is acute and therefore powerful, and Gad-Cykman is a master at that. She bends the words to convey the prosaic as well as the outstanding with such dexterity that even the surreal appears possible. Magic realism finds a fitting outlet under Gad-Cykman’s storytelling so much so that planting one’s fist in the ground to make babies, as told in “Growth”, sounds only reasonable.

In fact, Ana Sofia Marques Viana Ferreira (2020) highlights that magic realism is often a trait of flash fiction, as well as ellipsis and the ensuing reliance on the reader’s capacity to decode the message that is implied about what is left out. Ferreira mapped the production of flash fiction, or “microcontos,” in Brazil from 2000 to 2017 and argued that, although the genre is well established and studied in Hispanic and American contexts, in Lusophone ones this area of research is still in its infancy. Although Gad-Cykman writes in English and her current work is published by the American Ravena Press, the fact that the author is based in Brazil renders a rich terrain for flash-fiction studies. Academic analyses of her work can contribute to the mapping of “microcontos” in two contexts at once, the Lusophone and the American ones.

The characters who populate Gad-Cykman’s stories are Holocaust and camp survivors, children who struggle to understand what that means and why some adults in Israel seem so broken, but there are also brokenhearted and rebel teenagers, travelers of all sorts, and even Adam and Eve, who are Catholic and have gone out for dinner.

Some stories flirt with hilarity. The pervading tone, however, even of the light-hearted stories, does not leave much room for chuckles, but rather for a sense that the lives of the wonderful people and the things we cherish and love are fleeting, and therefore precious. One holds on to the stories as the characters do to whatever is being offered that mimics the warmth and loving-kindness once offered by the characters’ parents, uncles, and places as they eventually wash away with the passage of time. In “Little Did They Know,” a teenager who has lost her father at an early age (and is about to lose her mother) points out that she “laughed a lot, but on principle resented the world” (51). An older, more seasoned narrator in “The World: Freeze!” ponders the lessons learned in life and proclaims that “[t]here is no past, present and future, only time. A river of time” (135).

In fact, in this same story, the narrator says that “[s]ome wars seem necessary and yet, war is war” (134). Wars and their effects are almost omnipresent. In “Water Memory,” the first story, which is composed of small flashes of what seem like memories, we first see the transformation of the world from safe haven to threatening dome. On the other side of the Red Sea, across from where the narrator and her cousins are bathing, a flag on the Jordan shore suddenly becomes a sword. In response to the flying war objects they begin to grow accustomed to, the children “rise and perform a marching dance in their honor” (5). The full impact of war has not dawned on them yet. The characters’ curiosity over the regular conflicts in the Middle East grow, as well as the curiosity over the trauma that certain characters carry. The narrators’ own families are jigsaw puzzles with missing pieces. An aunt and an uncle went missing. One woman, a camp survivor, is fat. She is compensating for her past hunger. The other, Fania, also a survivor, had numbers tattooed on her skin and was laughed at by kids who had no idea what her eyes, which “were never quite alive” (18), meant.

There is not, however, a straightforward addressing of the fallout of the Holocaust in the stories either, neither by the parents in the stories nor by the narrators, but the treatment of the subject leaves room for speculation. “Their parents refused to discuss the past and tell them real-life stories,” the narrator of “Islands of Salt” complains, adding that “[t]he parents acted as if the Second World War had not reached its end yet and they were still fleeing, having no emotional capacity to look back” (19). In *Light Reflection Over Blues*, Gad-Cykman does the work of prodding into what has been buried in an attempt to work the path of trauma through.

In “The Key to this Story is Randomness,” for instance, the narrator ponders the different outcomes of her own life had she not been born in Israel, or had not wars made all other possibilities for her and her parents impossible. The Second World War robbed her father of the education he was pursuing in Poland, where he was born, and it robbed her mother of the intellectual life she was developing in Austria, where she was born. The narrator could have been born in either of the two countries, had her parents met one way or another, but now, not only does she carry the cancer genes that took them from her too soon, she was also born in a country in conflict, from where her ancestors had been long exiled. To get around the trauma, the characters dream of aunts whom they have never met because they went missing and students at a school buffer the sound of war jetplanes with “I love you! I love you! I love you!” (34).

With burdens so heavy to carry, many of the characters are sensuous in their descriptions of the frictions between their skin and the world. They evoke the relevance of the body in producing pleasures even when the subjective landscape is dire. In “Footmarks,” a bunch of young adults who are hiking through the Nepalese Himalayas take comfort in the presence of an older hiker, Benny, who is the father figure they have all been longing for. The young hikers touch one another – hands, shoulders, a kiss on the lips – in the grips of fear of the narrow passages of the trails,

of the growing pressures of taking on responsibilities in life (one of the young hikers has just found out he is to become a father) and, ultimately, the fear of death. By the end of the third day of trekking, the narrator shares that "...at night, some of us dreamt about falling, others about people who had passed away. I stayed awake and remembered my father" (92). When Benny treats the young hikers to his wisdom, the narrator and the other hikers feel soothed and fathered for a little while, but they soon learn that Benny himself has lost his son. At this point in the book, Gad-Cykman's storytelling has already settled as magnificent: we all have something to offer in order to soothe somebody else's pain. The narrator needed her father, and Benny, his son.

At the end of the day, when the reading has been rewarding and inspiring, what readers fantasize with is thanking authors for opening cracks into ourselves, for lighting the way into what troubles and delights our souls. In the third to last flash fiction of the book, "The Man Without Legs", and after one has traversed through the losses (and joys, to be fair) of life, the narrator asks "[a]re you, dear reader, recounting what *you* have lost? A lot. I know. Sometimes it feels like everything. Rest your head on my shoulder" (145, emphasis in the original). And one gladly does. Breaking the fourth wall after what seems to have been the witnessing of an arc of life – and in the company of the uncanny characters that populate the stories – is a generosity of the author. Gad-Cykman's narrator acknowledges the reader as confidante, as partaker in the heartache of life, in the longing for the comfort of a loving childhood long gone, for love, for those who have left. The invitation to join the narrator in bereavement is, in truth, a celebration of the fact that no burden goes unshared.

The book reads as one of memories, such is the intimacy Avital Gad-Cykman conjures with her words, but it is fiction. And even at their best, if any of what is told in *Light Reflection Over Blues* is based on the author's own life, memories are translated through time, affect, and longing, and thus become fictionalized versions of themselves. Interspersed with what seems like memories retold is the surreal, the impossible, and that does the job of pulling the reader out of the notion that we are reading someone's soul. We are reading our own, and that is literature at its best. Gad-Cykman's book should earn its way into readers' repertoires and into university syllabuses for students and lecturers alike to appreciate the word well-crafted.

Reference

- Gad-Cykman, Avital. *Light Reflection Over Blues: Short Prose*. Edmonds: Ravenna Press, 2022, 162 pp.
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Recebido em:

Aceito em: