

Anatolia and Other Stories

by Anis Shivani

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Reviewed by Alissa Schacter

Anis Shivani takes the reader on a fascinating journey through vast tracts of time and place in his debut collection, *Anatolia and Other Stories*. The eleven stories included in the book are simultaneously sweeping and intricate in their scope. Shivani displays a unique talent for bringing disparate and far-flung realities vividly to life, whether it's rapidly developing modern Dubai, the world of petty politics and intrigues pervading a Vermont writing conference, or newly independent India. He sprinkles his stories with culturally and historically specific language and details, lending them colour and authenticity. The reader has the distinct impression that Shivani has first-hand experience – though it seems impossible – with the various locales in which the stories are set, as he conjures them so lucidly. He also succeeds in artfully evoking the prevailing social and political power structures and the impact they have on the characters.

The stories are united by a vein of dislocation that runs through them all. The characters grapple with feelings of exclusion, whether economic, cultural, political or sexual. Shivani plays with the notion of “otherness” and explores the multifarious and sometimes unexpected manifestations of it in our complex global world. He is keenly interested in the effects of human migration and examines its immediate and long-term impacts from many angles. Most of the stories involve people navigating forces of change and shifting landscapes. In “Texas,” set in an affluent and colourless Houston suburb, Amy, an American girl from a working-class background is a live-in nanny for a successful couple recently immigrated from Malaysia. She struggles with her conflicting feelings of admiration, envy and latent hostility for her Muslim employers; while the beautiful young wife is generous and confides in her, Amy is made keenly aware of her place in the socio-economic hierarchy.

Only three years in the country, and the Zainul-Abidins understood infinitely more about the levers of power than Amy or anyone she'd grown up with could understand in a thousand years. . . . Amy felt second class, in her own country. (202)

Laced with searing social commentary, Shivani's stories ambitiously tackle some of the most significant social and moral issues we face in our times. “Repatriation” is a post-apocalyptic tale about the United States repatriating its non-white population after an unnamed crisis. It provides an eerie glimpse into the potential outcome if the balance between individual rights and security concerns were to swing sharply toward the latter. The title story, “Anatolia,” is set in a Turkish town during the Ottoman rule. It explores the various struggles the different characters face in coping with life in a deeply traditional society that is on the cusp of significant change.

The final story in the collection, “Tehran,” is perhaps the most arresting. Set in post-revolutionary Iran, it describes the aftermath of a suicide bomb attack in a café. It circles back to chronicle the lives of several of the victims and the attacker, and what brought each of them to that defining moment. This finely crafted story illuminates the everyday trials and accommodations

made by people living under an oppressive regime, as well as the small ways they find to express dissent. It is an elegant exposition of the hypocrisy of orthodoxy, whether religious or political, and, ultimately, a damning indictment of it.

Shivani sets his stories at the intersection of colliding values: east and west, old and new, traditional and modern, religious and secular. The stories are consistently thought-provoking and often challenge the reader's assumptions. Each one is like a rich tapestry, layered with insights into the predominant cultural mores and social pecking order of the society in which it is set. One comes away with a sense of the universality of the human struggle for freedom, dignity and self-expression.

Better known as a poet and literary critic, Shivani presents here his first foray into the genre of fiction. I was pleased to note he recently completed a yet to be published novel entitled "The Slums of Karachi." If the calibre of the current book is any indication, I look forward to seeing his talent brought to bear in another literary form. ❧

Alissa Schacter is a Winnipeg writer. She has worked as a lawyer and in economic development and policy.

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