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Book Review

DECEMBER 3, 2023



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REQUIEM

BY MATTILDA BERNSTEIN SYCAMORE

"I STARTED THIS BOOK two decades ago," Robert Glück tells us in his new novel, "About Ed," "so now it has turned into a ritual to prepare for death, and an obsession to put between death and myself." The book recounts his relationship with the artist Ed Aulerich-Sugai, Glück's lover for most of the 1970s and a close friend until Ed's death from AIDS in 1994. But it's also about the paradoxical impulse to simultaneously move on from those we've lost and enshrine them in our memories: "I want to

ABOUT ED

By Robert Glück

New York Review Books. 268 pp. Paperback, \$18.95

conserve experience and I want to throw it out."

For this impossible task, Glück relies not just on his own ruminations, but on Ed's dream diaries, on tape recordings of their conversations as Ed was dying, and on notes about their lives and loves. The result interweaves elements of biography, memoir, psychotherapy, philosophy and confession. Glück's long struggle to write this book remains palpable in its fragmented structure.

"About Ed" may be Glück's homage to Ed, but that doesn't mean their relationship was easy. Glück details their many feuds and jealousies. "I want to improve our relationship," he thinks while sitting in bed next to Ed's body, just after his death, "so that I can have been a better friend to him, and we can have been better lovers, as though now that he's dead he can go back in time."

Unlike in many conventional narratives about dying lovers, Ed's death occurs in the middle of the book rather than at the end, so the reader must contend with what comes after as much as what comes before. But ultimately, "About Ed" looks not so much toward the future as it does toward a suspended past. If this is a book about a lost loved one, it is also a memorial to a lost sensibility, a period in the 1970s when sex was "founded on hope," before the onslaught of the AIDS crisis.

Glück writes through digression, in conversation with the inevitable and the unknown at once. This is a stylistic choice, but also a method of opening up the text: Each paragraph becomes a living, growing thing, pushing in all directions. It's a key feature of the irreverent school of writing that came to be known as New Narrative, founded by Glück and his friend Bruce Boone in the late 1970s. They wanted to challenge conventional linear structure and either/or dichotomies by reveling in gossip, self-exposure, sexual candor and the excesses of voice, explod-

MATTILDA BERNSTEIN SYCAMORE is the author, most recently, of "Touching the Art."

ing the boundaries of fiction, autobiography and truth. New Narrative emerged alongside the sexual politics of gay liberation in San Francisco, and shared its belief in desire as a portal to possibility.

Glück is a master of the scathing aside; some of his one-liners double as philosophical statements. On the 1980s: "Distance replaces the excesses and heartfelt essences of the '70s." On childhood: "How did you survive? I didn't, someone else was kept alive." On abusive families: "Love devastates by making us participate."

The author returns to this fateful trio of distance, survival (or death) and devastation throughout. When he notes that the AIDS crisis led "some of us into a deeper



Robert Glück, left, and Ed Aulerich-Sugai.

engagement with the world," he does not include himself. But his decades-long effort to write something meaningful about it, despite self-doubt, belies his detachment. "My life's sole aim is to hide my own weakness from myself," he writes, "but my weakness is the way into the world." Here and elsewhere in the book, Glück's candor reshapes self-absorption into a mode of inquiry.

"Is the body a crime against time?" Glück asks, shortly before the final section of "About Ed," which starts two years before Ed's death and travels back to 1970, when Glück met him on a streetcar in San Francisco. "Is all life a distraction?"

Time is both antagonist and protagonist in this novel; it brings both the terror of finality and the consolation of the indefinite. "Writing this does not alter the hope that Ed won't die," Glück says. "Even though he is dead, the hope will not die." □

NEW VIEW

BY LAUREN ELKIN



SINCE HER HUSBAND'S untimely death, the unnamed narrator of Lisa Tuttle's feminist novella "My Death" has not been able to work or write. Instead, she has isolated herself in their house on the west coast of Scotland.

On a trip to Edinburgh to see her agent, who she hopes will help revive her flagging career, she wanders into the National Gallery. There she has a chance encounter with one of her favorite paintings, "Circe" (1928), by the fictional artist W.E. Logan, the portrait's "pale face stern and angular" and "intimately familiar to me."

The dramatic back story is familiar to the narrator as well. Circe — that is, Helen Elizabeth Ralston — had been Logan's

MY DEATH

By Lisa Tuttle

New York Review Books. 105 pp. Paperback, \$15.95.

lover. Her teacher at art school, he'd "kept" her in a flat in the West End of Glasgow.

Soon after sitting for "Circe," she had leaped from a window, surviving the fall — though badly injured. Then, after Logan's mysterious and sudden blinding, Ralston had run away to Paris, never to see him again.

Ralston would become a celebrated writer, her novel "In Troy" — the "green-backed Virago classics" edition — a formative influence on the narrator. (The passing references to Carmen Callil and Angela Carter are just part of the novella's delightful blending of fact and fiction, realism and fantasy.)

But biographical information about Ralston is scarce, and published accounts of her relationship with Logan and subsequent jump have the predictable misogynist tinge: She is doomed to be forever cast as the obsessive, over-sexualized young woman, the muse. "Helen's experience, her interpretation, her story, was nowhere."

In the flush of a renewed spasm of art love, the narrator decides to embark on telling Ralston's side of the story: by writing her biography.

LAUREN ELKIN is the author, most recently, of "Art Monsters."

Ralston, it transpires, is still alive, though very old, and willing — too willing? — to meet. Arriving at her home, the narrator finds the older woman has *her* book on the shelf. And in some notebooks in Ralston's archive, she discovers mysterious references to her own life. But how could Ralston possibly have access to that deeply private information?

Tuttle's work to date has been categorized as horror, or speculative fiction, and "My Death" deftly navigates between conventional storytelling and the uncanny feeling that things are perhaps other than they appear. The theme of the alternate feminist narrative is actually integrated into the form of the novel itself, in a final impressive loop-de-loop that I did not see coming and that has left me scratching my head.

At the heart of the text is a mysterious island off the coast of Scotland, Achlan, an important pagan funeral site of which Ralston painted a watercolor she called "My Death." The image of the island, under scrutiny, reveals itself to be, in fact, Ralston's answer to Courbet's explicit painting "The Origin of the World": "The center of the painting, what drew the eye and commanded the attention, was the woman's vulva: All the life of the painting was concentrated there. A slash of pink, startling against the mossy greens and browns, seemed to touch a nerve in my own groin."

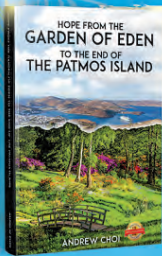
Tuttle carefully tracks its impact on the narrator, the conflicting feelings of desire and outrage and embarrassment and respect: "I struggled to understand my own reaction," she admits.

The novella is just as richly ambiguous, though perhaps less difficult to confront. Delicious and short, with not a word wasted, "My Death" asks much bigger questions than its size would suggest.

Why are we predestined to love certain writers? What is the personal algorithm of affinity? How do we keep our creativity and curiosity alive in the face of loss and hardship?

In the end, "My Death" is not about death at all, but about life after catastrophe: how art revives us, and how writers live on in their readers. □

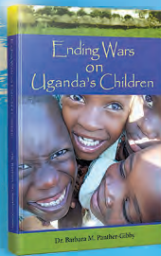
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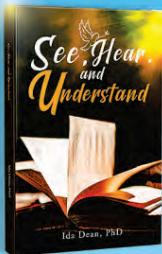


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And Other Lessons I've Learned Along the Way

Iris M. Sidhu

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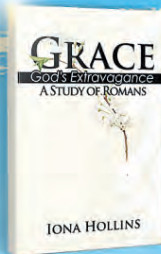
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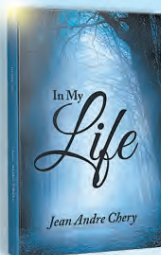
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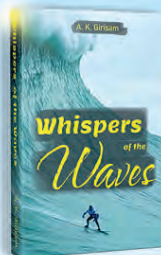
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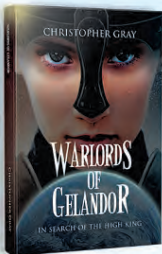
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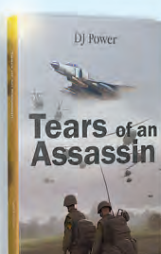
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