

**Review of ASPECTS OF NATURE: short stories by Rhoda Rabinowitz Green**

Reviewed by Janette Turner Hospital

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The title of this collection of stories is richly ambiguous. The stories themselves function symphonically, not only because they are linguistically musical, but because themes appear and reappear in different keys, different tempos, different weathers, different life stages. Turbulent weather (internal and external) are the aspects of nature most closely explored by Green and her range is orchestral in scope and subject matter. Music and memory are central.

**Music** is consolation and an otherworld of absolute freedom. Music is also tyrannical in its demands and its quest for perfection. **Memory** has the power to reanimate lost time and lost people. Without memory, there could be no narrative writing, no stories could be told. But there is a terrifying aspect to the nature of memory: it can deteriorate, it can extinguish itself, leaving behind the wraith of a human being remembered only by others, unintelligible to itself.

Although these stories deal with loss, with dying, and with the fear of dying, there is never a trace of sentimentality. They are acerbic, funny, and diabolically astute in anatomizing petty jealousies and social game playing. They are both tough and tender, and Green's restraint is remarkable. *The night was heavy with rain*, we learn as a man sits at the bedside of his dying wife, *just another rainy evening, establishing his grief as only one microscopic part of the world's sorrow.*

Feminist and gender issues are explored in innovative ways. Some are familiar: the stresses in two-career marriages; the familial anxieties associated with teenage and college-age children; the inevitable resentment over children who take their father's career for granted, but resent their mother's. Other gender issues are rarely treated in contemporary fiction. Perhaps we should be grateful for that since it is evidence that the times actually are changing. Perhaps one has to be the age of the author and of this reviewer to remember the patronizing dismissals that were absolutely standard when a woman – armed with a stellar resume -- applied for any given position. It was irrelevant that she could demonstrate that she had out-performed all the male candidates. "I'll bet on the men who make careers," the head of a fellowship committee tells a gifted female pianist. "Women make bambinos." Then he turns fatherly. "Come now, my dear. You made your decision the moment you said *I do*."

One crucially pertinent feminist issue involves the fraught relationship between a woman and her doctor. If a woman wants a second opinion about a risky procedure, or about an unclear prognosis, she is trapped in a double bind. She is both plaintiff and defendant, as well as having to be her own lawyer. Since the doctor is both judge and jury, the plaintiff/lawyer walks on eggshells. Offending the jury is dangerous. The stakes are high. The death penalty is the ultimate outcome.

The story "Dear Doctor" is as harrowing as it is grimly hilarious. *You did return my call, Dr Thompson. You asked, "Don't you like us?" Again I hastened to reassure, explain that I wanted a second opinion and a mammogram within less time than you were willing to schedule. But this love thing... it motivates us all, doesn't it, Doctor? It strikes*

*me that without the manifest bestowal of love from patients (the public), the medical profession must seek the only symbolic redress possible. Money.*

Two of the stories (“Shayndeleh” and “Shayndeleh’s Real Estate”) are daringly innovative, and the success of their narrative experiment is unsettling. The narrator, a widow once known in the family as *Shayndeleh*, the “pretty one,” has aged back into her given name of Jeanne. She is in the dementia ward of a nursing home and is both inside her own stream-of-consciousness narration and also outside as a sharp observer of herself (with occasional unobtrusive off-stage assistance from the omnipotent authorial voice.) I can think of literary and cinematic parallels: Iris Murdoch being aware of her own mental decline; Alice Munro’s short story “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” and its beautiful cinematic interpretation by Julie Christie (in “Away from Her.”) Those are tragic and deeply moving accounts of subjects who are aware that they are slipping into the gray zone of Alzheimer’s. But the narrators of those accounts are the bewildered and compassionate and grieving husbands.

Shayndeleh is the narrator of her own downward drift. Rhoda Rabinowitz Green, in her rigorously unsentimental style, gives us a narrator every bit as acerbic and prickly and wickedly witty as she’d been her whole life. She is allergic to platitudinous sympathy. *Jeanne turns a blank stare to her niece, thinking how she used to have such nice dark hair... Then she married one of the orthodox-- what Jeanne considers over-Jewish. Calls herself Tzipporah instead of Sarah and dresses like for an old lady.*

When her niece encourages her to join a group at Bingo or cards, Jeanne explodes. *“With those crazy people? Why am I here? My mind is good.... I’m so angry! I’m... just a minute, I’ll tell you...”*

*She drifts off, sifting through a catalogue of hurts. What was it that had so infuriated? The incident gone; it doesn't matter, the feeling still burns. Her eyes flash and her voice tremors with emotional recall. "Yesterday... yesterday I...."*

The ending is simultaneously an acknowledgement of defeat and a triumphant survival of the flinty seed of the true self defying its own dissolution: *Now she's resolved to quit this Home that will never be home.... She thinks she'll take her cane and leave the walker behind, like useless baggage... Next time Tzippi comes to visit... she won't be here. She'll be on a bus to Somewhere. She doesn't know where. She'll just ride.*

The heart and soul of the entire collection is the lengthy **Finding Maryan**, an extraordinarily powerful and structurally complex and brilliant piece writing which gathers all Green's themes into its symphonic self. It could be a self-standing novella: part fiction, part autobiography, part memoir, part documentary on the Holocaust and surviving it, part an account of a world-famous pianist who is also an exacting music teacher. There is an almost unbearably poignant coda of a reunion between the devoted student and the maestro who can no longer remember his own life, though many years after surviving the camps he had written a memoir. *Perhaps he'll have to reread his book*, the narrator thinks.

Rhoda Rabinowitz Green, an accomplished pianist who studied for many years with Maryan Filar, appends an "Author's Note" to this story: *Research and my imagination put flesh on the bones of accounts of Mr. Filar's life in Poland before the War and in the Nazi camps and helped me fill in gaps where I could not possibly have had first-hand knowledge. I studied with Maryan Filar – newly arrived in the United States – in Philadelphia in the fifties. Real-life facts, a few snippets of Mr. Filar's*

*remembered accounts of dialogue, and events, have been gathered from descriptions told to me by him over the years, from the taped interview he gave for the Spielberg Shoah Foundation archives at Yale University in 1994, and from his book From Buchenwald to Carnegie Hall.... And, of course, from my visit with him in his retirement home in 2009. Maryan Filar died at the age of 95, in Philadelphia in 2012, having succumbed to advanced Alzheimer's.*

**Finding Maryan** is a fitting elegy to a remarkable life.