

## Toronto Theatre Critic, Lynn Slotkin Reviews *Aspects of Nature*

In *Aspects of Nature* Rhoda Rabinowitz Green has written eleven exquisite short stories that take us into the worlds of music, memory, survival, aging gracefully and sometimes kicking and screaming with full fury. She writes with compassion and sensitivity of the minutiae of being a woman in today's world which sometimes might be a world that is passing by. Every woman will understand. Every man will be enlightened. And in a few cases you will be justifiably infuriated.

Rhoda Rabinowitz Green studied music seriously in university, particularly piano, perhaps towards having a concert career. In "*The Wind at Her Back*" she writes of Miriam who is preparing for two major concerts and her celebrated teacher, Ari Zachar, who is coaching her. Green writes with an insider's focus about phrasing, pacing, holding back the emotion until the payoff, but her writing does not exclude the reader who is not immersed in the world of music.

In the case of Miriam's teacher, Green also illuminates the solitary, single-minded life a concert pianist must live in order to succeed. If Miriam mused on having a more personal relationship with Ari, it was not shared with Ari. He knew what he had to do to maintain his high level of expertise and his reputation and that left no room for anyone in his life but himself.

"*Finding Maryan*" is the longest story in this collection and perhaps the most personal for Rhoda Rabinowitz Green. While I'm sure all the stories are personal, Green puts herself in this one as a witness, recorder and keeper of a memory.

Maryan Filar was a noted, gifted concert pianist and teacher. His reputation as a master was legendary. Rhoda Rabinowitz Green was one of his students and writes beautifully of a how this gifted teacher affected her: "For me, he was a figure of strength, a creator of Beauty. You will understand, then, that it was the music *and* the man I came to revere and love." We have all had teachers like that. Rhoda Rabinowitz Green describes it perfectly.

Green writes of Filar's life growing up in a comfortable home in Warsaw, Poland; loved and cherished by his family, encouraged in his musical gifts. He flourished in music. She describes how he played the "Black Key Etude" by Chopin: "...his fingers butterflies flitting quick and light over the keys." A stunning image in a book full of them. Filar was diligent and devoted to his art. Life was sweet. And then the Nazis invaded Poland and that lovely world was shattered. Filar wrote a book: *From Buchenwald to Carnegie Hall* which says everything in five simple, stunning words. Green writes that Filar kept his secrets about that time in the concentration camps but eventually the memories and

facts came out in a torrent. Green captures the determination and urgency that Filar had to regain his abilities to play the piano once he was a free man.

When he was an old man in a nursing home, Green visited him and they reminisced. Filar had a life full of memories and now his memory was broken, fading, lost. Green in a sense became his memory, that's how devoted she was to him.

Rhoda Rabinowitz Green writes of single-minded men devoted to their musical careers and to creating their art. She also writes of devoted, accommodating, trusting women who often have to put their own dreams on hold, or have to trust men to do right by them, and find this doesn't always work to their advantage.

In ***"You Make Your Decision"*** Green writes about Jenny who was devoted to her music and wanted a career. But she's not able to pursue that career because of her ambitious husband whose career comes first. He gives lip service to Jenny saying she can get a piano and join various musical groups where her husband's next promotion will take them. The dutiful wife. The hard-working husband who knows the right buzz-words to use, "I already told you how important it (the promotion) is to me....Jenny nods; it says I know, I know. This is what happens after their discussions, more like persuasions; she sees the logic of the situation and calms down, but her insides begin to churn just *thinking* about giving up the Lawrence Park house." It's a story that evolves slowly, gracefully but with those jarring bits as Jenny tries to look on the bright side of situations that are far from bright. I hold tightly to the book as I quickly turn the pages. Are my insides churning in understanding and compassion just a touch, for Jenny?

Rhoda Rabinowitz Green writes so vividly in ***"Dear Doctor"*** of a situation we all have experienced—the doctor, too busy to deal with his worried patient and the patient, Rose Enfield, who feels embarrassed because she doesn't want "To bother the doctor" with her concerns. There is a receptionist named Joy ("So *earnestly* joyless!) and his "crisp nurse." The doctor was supposed to do another mammogram and seems to have forgotten and now Rose needs someone to tell her what is happening. She is told by the "joyless Joy" that Rose will have to speak directly to the doctor and that will take time. Rose has copious notes to help her should she be lucky enough to speak to the doctor, notes for reference, to give her confidence, to help her state her case. But if the doctor doesn't speak with her, what can she do? She can write him a letter setting out all her concerns, frustrations and anger.

It is a masterful letter, full of wit, irony, full-throttled fury couched in nuance and sarcasm. Rose is most confident when writing. Green takes on the medical profession here. There is the busy, all-knowing doctor who has to deal with the troublesome patient who reminds him he didn't do something important that might affect her life. Green lays out Rose's concerns, her recollections of what happened or not, who said what and how it was phrased and how she feels she has been treated. The details weave and knit into

themselves; the writing lulls you into a situation that we all recognize—those churned insides again. I'm holding the book a bit tighter here, but silently cheering the fearless Rose by the end of the story.

Rose Enfield is also the 'star' of *Age Appropriate*. In this one Rose writes another letter to another doctor, a plastic surgeon in this case, explaining a decision she made. She had noticed signs of her aging: lines on her face, sagging skin here, a droop there. She thought a bit of a nip and tuck might be in order. Doctor Tucker (is there a sly pun there, Ms Green?) says that it's not that simple. Rose has to consider the whole package that this can't be done piece-meal.

Here Rhoda Rabinowitz Green's laser-sharp observations are withering. There is the snotty comment by the nurse: "Don't worry, dear, you can be repaired." Or when Rose expresses concern about the extensiveness of the procedure the doctor queries: "Don't you want to look your very best for your husband." (I'm gritting my teeth and exhaling slowly). Green muses on relationships, beauty, the tyranny of wanting to look younger, those damned wrinkles. (When George Bernard Shaw was writing about the aged, brilliant Italian actress Duse, he said her wrinkles "were the credentials of her humanity.") How Rose reasons out her decision is a thing of beauty.

In *Aspects of Nature* there are also stories about aging, old age, loosing ones independence but establishing a smaller more focused world, and stories about adult children and their relationships to their aging parents and vice versa. Rhoda Rabinowitz Green has a wonderful, robust sense of language, description, how to express the most complex of emotions and make it all seem effortless. You are so aware you are reading the words of a gifted writer because she takes you deep into the lives of the people in her stories.

No less a personage than Janette Turner Hospital has said of Rhoda Rabinowitz Green's work: "I have been immensely impressed with the intelligence and subtlety of Rhoda's work. I do urge that it be given serious reading. I can guarantee it will be worth the while." I totally agree. I can hardly wait to read Rhoda Rabinowitz Green's next book.

*Lynn Slotkin, Critic*

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