BOOK OF THE MONTH

Leore Dayan
People Prefer to Drown in the Sea
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An Ironist from Israel

Amos Oz and Etgar Keret belong to the canon of Israeli literature. Leore Dayan's stories destroy our conception of young Jews and their contemporary fiction

Should you go to any university yard in Poland and ask students to describe young Israelis in just two sentences, most of them would probably mention the compulsory military service and the tours to our country to visit the sites commemorating the Holocaust. And if you were to ask who they think wrote that "Israelis are the stupidest nation on earth", they would never guess that the author of this opinion is a 30-year-old man from Tel Aviv. Nonetheless, Leore Dayan in his debut collection of short stories writes about modern Israel in a brilliant and quite nonchalant way. The whole affair is spiced by the fact that Leore is... the grandson of Moshe Dayan, the Israeli Minister of Defense, Foreign Affairs and a General in the Six-Day War, an Israeli hero.

Leore's articles have been published in *Maariw* daily, *Ha'ir* weekly, and on *Wow* website. He is also a television celebrity. Pretending to be a Polish tourist, he once went to Ramallah to ask... what's going on. A bit like Sacha Baron Cohen, and a bit like Kuba Wojewódzki (but much younger). And such as the unexpected visit to Ramallah are his stories. This fiction deals neither with the painful history, nor with the big politics. He writes about everyday, seemingly trivial matters, as well as about personal and even intimate issues. He does not escape from the reality of Israel, including the political scene, but it gets filtered in a distanced way: satirically, mockingly (e.g. in the stories "*The Cyprus Project*", "*Dental Camcorders Are a Shitty Deal*"), and even using the black humour ("*The Last Mission of Soldier R.*"). The writing convention is humorous, almost pure nonsense, and the language – simple with a large dose of irony.

The book consists of nine stories (the title of the last of them is also the title of the whole volume). All the main characters are young Israelis, who share a common feature ... they hardly know what to do in life. Having completed the military service, they either start a job that has been arranged by

their parents ("*Meir Rozental*"), or take up some unimportant occupation (Miki Gur from the "*Poems of Love*" works at a printing shop, and is a "spare-time poet"). Adulthood is beyond them, they prefer to stay with their parents – like Meir Rozental who lives in a container standing in the family garden, or his older 29-year-old sister who still writes a diary in her childhood room! The attempts to rebel against authorities, or even against the daily rituals, bring the story characters to a tragic end ("*Meir Rozental*") or at least... to the psychiatric ward. The hero of "*People Prefer to Drown in the Sea*" once again "pays a visit" to the psychiatric hospital, where he is treated at the manic-depressive ward. He uses that time for dating and hooking up ("the girls after a suicide attempt are the easiest"), as well as for touring the hospital (he forms "tourist groups" from among the patients and walks them through individual departments). When not in a mental clinic, he works as a lifeguard at the pool – "*because it's an easy job. A lifeguard doesn't have to work really (...) you don't need to talk to people.*" Just so: Dayan's characters rarely talk to each other, and when they do, they often do not say what they truly think. Not to worry when it is typical of a paranoiac like Lior in the story "*Dental Camcorders Are a Shitty Deal*". The young man works for a newspaper, seems to have a normal life. But in his apartment, there is... a secret tunnel in the living room (!), where he often hides. An ordinary visit to a dentist triggers off an attack of paranoia. Lior believes that his dentist installed a miniature camcorder into the treated tooth that would keep track of everything he does and says. In order to avoid complete surveillance, Lior decides to lie and act unconventionally: "*I didn't know exactly what I was trying to escape from, but I knew I had to run away.*" However, his fervour ends up within just a couple of hours. After the next visit at the dentist's and "removal of the camcorder", the man returns calmly to his home.

Far more serious consequences result from the irresponsible behaviour of the protagonist of "*The Cyprus Project*" (which in my opinion is one of the best stories in the volume). Not to break the suspense, I can just say that a single internet publication causes an international crisis, the President of Israel is forced to resign, an innocent man commits suicide, and the perpetrator of the entire event... asks his friend for an advice, what he should do in such situation. This is the story that contains the above-quoted iconoclastic statement about Israelis.

And what is the outcome of going by accepted standards, in line with the so-called procedure? I would recommend "*The Last Mission of Soldier R.*" – an ironic and tragicomic tale about a Balloon Release Unit, which is a small squad responsible for "letting the balloon go near a nuclear reactor in the south of the country". The mission so secret that even the residing three officers, who knew a little bit, never explained to their subordinate soldiers what tasks are performed by the military zeppelin. As long as everything went according to the plan, to the very minute, as long the service in this unit seemed to be a boring occupation, and all involved persons believed that all procedures were entirely reliable. Yet it took just one mistake to initiate a tragedy – because soldier R. followed the rules.

Dayan's stories open a new series of "Contemporary Israeli fiction" of the publishing house Filo. After reading the book "*People Prefer to Drown in the Sea*", I am eagerly and curiously waiting for the next volumes in the series to be released.

Agnieszka Niemojewska

In Israel, the military service is compulsory
for all citizens above the age of 18.
Women spend two years in the army.