The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Olga Zilberbourg's 'Like Water and Other Stories'

Short stories explore bicultural identity hilariously, poignantly

By Anna Kasradze

August 24, 2019

Author Olga Zilberbourg **Gulsum Na / MT**

Born in Leningrad, U.S.S.R. in 1979, Olga Zilberbourg moved to the United States when she was seventeen. Following three short story collections in Russian, her first English collection. "Like Water and Other Stories," explores the lives of women who have different and often competing roles and cultures. She introduces the intriguing theory that "the past, future, and present exist simultaneously in different parts of spacetime" and spans vast stretches of space and time from Soviet Russia to contemporary San Francisco.

Zilberbourg brings this theory to life through stories narrated by women of three generations. Russian-American women try with mixed success to cultivate appreciation of buckwheat and herring in their American husbands. Post-Soviet grandparents visit America "for about a month or two at a time, cleaning, cooking, and reading Pushkin to the grandkids, who had

long given up the fight against the classic" ("Cream and Sugar"). Zilberbourg lets the reader peek into such a rich variety of lives that the book often reads like an anthropological survey.

Of the three generations, Zilberbourg's own generation of bicultural millennials appears ambivalent about cultural clashes, adopting a tender irony toward their parents' culture. At a dinner in Russia, one character wonders "How many kilos of mayonnaise went into the killing of perfectly good vegetables?" but chooses to keep visiting her Russian family, even as her American husband calls her a "glutton for punishment," because she "never [has] anything positive to say about these visits" ("Doctor Sveta"). By gently poking fun at the traditions they've inherited, the bicultural millennials pickle the tropes as they preserve them.

Of course, there are many more serious cultural clashes in the collection. But whether it is a woman's Russian family pressuring her to have children or her American girlfriend not understanding the importance of her Russian community, the stories always avoid explicit moralizing, instead proposing an attitude of resigned tolerance for inevitable tensions. This balance permits Zilberbourg to show the hilarity of these cultural clashes without reducing the characters to punchlines. The collection's humor is one its greatest strengths. In one particularly amusing story, a millennial woman takes her mother to her therapist, telling him, "It would save us a bunch of time if you could just meet her." Her mother informs the therapist, "Frankly, I don't believe in therapy" ("Therapy. Or Something").

However hilarious, the members of the older generation are the chroniclers of stories and memories that the younger generations listen to, enthralled. Another story, "The Swallow," models a way of reading the collection as a whole. A young woman is captivated by the story of Stepan, who survived the winter of 1992 without heat or running water through extreme feats of innovation:

"My aunt is growing purple with the unexpressed and inexpressible anger about the future of the world, in general, and of us, the children, in particular; she is giving me the eye because I'm the youngest and I'm supposed to clear away the pasta dishes to make room for dessert plates—but how can I leave the table? Stepan's deep mellow voice soars in my heart."

The thread connecting these tales is each protagonist's attempt to come to terms with an identity that is always in flux, transitioning between various contexts such as emigration, motherhood, partnership, and employment. For this reason, bicultural readers of varied backgrounds will likely hear their own experiences resonating with this collection. Together, the 52 stories of "Like Water and Other Stories" offer shards of spacetime and leave the reader to piece them together. This format consistently frustrates the reader's search for one big takeaway or one favorite character, but it allows the reader to experience alongside the characters their struggle for takeaways and coherent selves.

The empathy Zilberbourg succeeds in evoking suggests that more urgent than reconciling the fragments of our lives is figuring out how to experience this conundrum together. Here, Zilberbourg has an answer: don't rush to clear away the pasta dishes.

A story Oz had written nearly won a prize. Though the story came in second, it received some notice. A New York agent contacted her. "I have read the story of yours and think it's wonderful. Do you have a novel you need representation for?"

Oz had no novel, but she did have a nineteen-month-old. “He’s very much like a novel,” she told the agent. “Can I ship him to you? People are telling me, since he can walk, that he’s no longer a baby. Soon he’ll be ready for publication.”

The agent asked to see a picture. Oz sent a recent image of the child in the park, holding a white-headed dandelion by the stem.

The child’s pale curls, backlit by the setting sun, resembled the dandelion.

The agent liked the picture and asked to see “Dandelion” in person. Before shipping her child off to New York, Oz added the final touches. She cut his hair and trimmed his nails. She gave him a long bath to scrub the dandruff from his scalp and the playground grime from his hands and face. She outfitted him with a leash harness, so he wouldn’t be able to run into traffic. She cut off feet from his pajamas and straps from his hat to make it look more like a baseball cap. She taught him to smile and give high-fives when he was too shy to say hello. Oz didn’t have time to teach him to use the toilet, and this concerned her a great deal. She wrote to the agent, asking for advice, but the agent assured her it would be fine. If a publisher would take “Dandelion” on, they would toilet-train using their preferred method.

“I frequently advise authors to leave one obvious flaw for the publisher to edit,” the agent wrote.

“The editors will edit, and unless you give them something obvious to work with, they are liable to start messing with the parts they better leave alone.”

Having done everything she could think of, Oz presented the child to her husband. Her husband was Oz’s first reader, and though not very familiar with the publishing industry, gave common sense advice that helped her make sure she was on the right track. “You may have cut his hair too short,” the husband said, running his fingers across the child’s head. “Otherwise, he’s perfect.” He asked the child to point out his belly button and then tickled him until the child was squealing with laughter. “I’m going to miss him,” the husband said. “But I guess if he’s to be published, I’ll see him soon.”

The husband helped Oz package and ship “Dandelion” to New York. Then, they waited.

The agent acknowledged receipt, and said that “Dandelion” was as beautiful in person as he’d looked in the picture.

A week later, she wrote to say that he was a very active child with boundless curiosity, and that she would right away introduce him to several publishers and schedule an auction. She asked if there were a code word or a particular bedtime routine that could help “Dandelion” relax and be still for more than a few minutes at a time. Reading books to him didn’t seem to help; he wanted to flip the pages himself and kept asking to see the cats. “I’m not sure what cats he means. These old school publishers are tired,” she wrote. “They want to take on familiar, well-behaved projects.”

Oz suggested taking “Dandelion” on a good long walk, to tire him out, and then giving him a bath.

When she didn’t hear back from the agent, she started to worry.

After three weeks, Oz broke decorum and wrote again to ask about “Dandelion.” “He’s my only child,” she explained, “and, though I know it’s already out of my hands, I do worry about his future. I want to make sure I’ve done my best by him.

It took the agent another week to write back. “Dandelion” had been introduced to nearly a dozen publishers, the agent reported, but unfortunately, he failed to make the right impression. It turned out, he didn’t do well under pressure. He kept asking for mommy and other things he couldn’t have. He didn’t respond well to discipline. He refused to hold hands when walking down the street and darted into traffic with such force that he took his leash with him. He was still alive, but barely.

In short, no bids were forthcoming. The agent didn’t see any point in trying again later. A basic character flaw made the child unacceptable to the major publishers. “Being in San Francisco,” the agent wrote, “you will be tempted to publish with an independent press. I would strongly counsel against this. Publishing with a small press makes you look desperate and abstruse. If you want to make it in New York, you have to work harder.”

The agent sent the child back. Oz barely recognized him. He looked like a dandelion whose seeds had all blown away. He smelled like a sewer; his loaded diaper had not been changed during transit but instead encased in a second pair of pants.

Together, Oz and her husband washed the child. They’d hoped that once his hair was clean and dry, it would curl back up, but they were disappointed. The awful smell was gone, but the hair remained thin and straight.

Oz returned to writing short fiction, while her husband cared for the child. “Let’s see if you still like being tickled,” he said, and chased after the boy, who promptly climbed from the dining room chair onto the table, nearly turning both over as he jumped to the floor. A step ahead of his father, he ran to his old bedroom, where Oz had recently moved her desk, and went to hide in her drawer.

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“Dandelion” appeared in the anthology Luggage (Fall 2018)

“Cream and Sugar” was first published in the museum of americana 15 (Summer 2018)

“Doctor Sveta” was first published in Alaska Quarterly Review 34, 3 &4 (Winter/Spring 2018)

“The Swallow” was first published in Narrative magazine (June 2010)

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/08/24/olga-zilberbourgs-like-water-and-other-stories-a66997