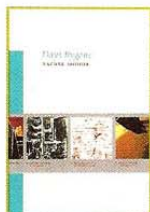


Reviews

Days Bygone by Rachel Shihor (The Cahiers Series)

Janet Mundy



"Days Bygone" is one of a series of "cahiers" (Hutchinson's

Encyclopaedia defines a cahier as "an artist's working notes or drawings") published by Sylph Editions and the American University of Paris. It is made up of four excerpts from Rachel Shihor's second novel "Yankinton", narrated by a woman reminiscing on her youth in Tel Aviv in the 1940s and 50s. In keeping with the definition above, "Days Bygone" is a beautifully designed volume, illustrated by David Hendler. The title of each excerpt is given in Hebrew, in a large calligraphic typeface, as a reminder that each story has been translated.

There is an immediate poetic quality to the first excerpt, "My aunt, my father's sister, chose a monkey". The phrase "my aunt, my father's sister" is repeated several times in the story and while it may seem to indicate a closeness between the aunt and the father, here it emphasises subversiveness, as the aunt undermines the father's authority to take his children to the zoo to fulfil their desire to be close to animals, banned in the home. However, the phrase also suggests affection between the girl and her paternal aunt, as well as forgiveness for the aunt's irresponsible behaviour that leads towards a disaster for the chosen monkey.

The second excerpt, "From time to time, my parents would go to the cinema", starts by relating the usual routine of the parents' evening out, and the left-at-home daughters' quiet rituals. However, on the evening in question, the parents had misled the daughters, and had in fact gone out in futile pursuit of a bogus plumber, and return home sad and unfulfilled. The narrator remembers the incident as a metaphor for their lives.

The third, very short, excerpt shows that the narrator is writing about an observant Jewish home, one where "the only thing left for us to do was to wait for three

stars to appear in the sky before the electric bulbs began to glow". Like all the excerpts, it is poetic and evocative, in this case of the boredom experienced by children waiting for Shabbat, and therefore the inactivity, to pass.

The last excerpt views old age through the eyes of a child, and a parent's hiding of illness and death to protect "childhood as a child's period of life".

After reading these quiet, exquisite excerpts, it was no surprise to me to discover that the author is a philosopher, as they all have a contemplative air – one can imagine the young girl looking on at the small adventures experienced by her elders and analysing them many years later from an adult viewpoint.

There is a fascinating essay by the translator, Ornan Rotem, on the technicalities of translating these texts. He describes Shihor's as a "language of opposites" and alludes to the difficulty of maintaining the essence of her prose when translating into English, a language with such a different syntax and history from Hebrew. He illustrates this by describing the awkwardness of the phrase "my aunt, my father's sister" in English, unlike the more elegant *dotati achot-avi* in Hebrew, and he takes his lead from a similar phrase translated in the King James Version of the Bible. Other equally awkward details of the translator's processes are given. On this evidence, Rotem has done justice to Shihor's original text, and it is to be hoped that more of her work will be translated for English language readers to enjoy.

Left Luggage (1998)

Judith Sischy

'A beautiful, warm picture filled with compassion and humanity, making understandable even the behaviour of the pathetic anti-Semite superintendent.'

Set in Antwerp, 1972, the central character in the film is Chaya, played by Laura Fraser, the daughter of parents who had survived but lost most of their family in the Holocaust. The central story is how Chaya takes a job as a nanny to a strictly observant Hassidic family, how her relationship with the family develops, especially with one of the children,