Review of:

Letters from Inside: The Best of Mike Maggio

Vine Leaves Press

November 2019

“Mother is crying.” “They’re up there.” “Henry was a flower”. Many of the stories in this book begin with crisp, intriguing, inviting sentences. These sentences draw us in, and they *keep* us in.

Other stories begin with sentences less crisp, but just as intriguing and inviting. “When Walter Feebish said that he could not afford to die, he meant it.” “One of them is in the bathroom, the other is in the bedroom talking with Mommy.”

I was tempted to begin this review with a crisp sentence: These stories are great! But of course Maggio’s crisp sentences are more intriguing and inviting. However, these stories *are* great.

One of Maggio’s themes has been the bureaucracy/corruption/violence/capitalism/etc. But his writing is neither obvious nor invasive. You don’t have to be politically correct to read his work, but reading his work might help you *become* politically correct. He takes on vulnerability, powerlessness, and emotion; the reader can decide who the villains is, or who the villains are. “Key Bridge”, the second story in the book, begins, “A most unusual thing happened on the morning of June 27th to M…” Indeed M. is caught up in circumstantial evidence; I was reminded of Kafka’s “Trial”. Minor aspects of his past trap him; media and popular culture don’t help. But he doesn’t seem to mind what has happened to him, which includes imprisonment. He calls (p. 26) ordinary living, outside of prisons, “their daily life of toil”. There are probably many themes of this story – the above-mentioned bureaucracy/corruption but also everyday life, individuals. Which is better -- when “most unusual” things happen, or when they don’t happen?

One of my favorites in the book is “The Good Civil Servant”. On the last day before retirement from his typically boring job, a man returns to his apartment, ready to spend the rest of his life not working (though that life, too, might be boring). He opens the door and finds his apartment empty. No furniture except his bed, etc. That in itself could be a good plot but there’s more. Maggio, in fact, and to my liking, always tells more, indeed tells MOST, tells to the max. He does not leave his readers hanging.

The next morning powerful people in power knock on his door and bid him follow them, as neighbors watch. Eventually, he learns that he is not being accused of any crime, but… well, here’s an interesting passage: “It reminded him of the day his mother’s body had been removed, how the neighbors had all gathered and watched quietly and solemnly, as it he had been to blame.”

Many of Maggio’s stories and passages tie in with Kafkaesque thoughts of my own. In the midst of reading this story I thought. “There’s no such thing as retirement. We’ve been lied to all our lives,” and eventually, “Everything we’ve ever been told and shown is a lie.” I was reminded of something I wrote in my diary during early adolescence: “Maybe really all children when they reach a certain age are killed, or taken prisoner, or something, and my parents can’t bear to tell me.”

At the end of the story we learn why this man has been summoned. Without givingtoo much away I’ll just say that it involves a kind of re-distribution of the wealth. That’s something I’m in favor of, but *how* that re-distribution is done matters. I was reminded of that difficult/stressful/impossible period of my life when I was applying for Medicaid, because my husband was going to live in a nursing home. “You’re allowed to have…” is a common phrase among people who have to deal with Medicaid, meaning you’re allowed a maximum amount of money, large possessions, and so on. I felt that this socialism-like aspect to our government, though socialism-like is to my liking, wasn’t quite taking everything into account. Those who *don’t* need Medicaid are “allowed” to have anything they can accumulate. Readers of Maggio’s story are free to entertain their own thoughts and associations with its conclusion. Maggio’s stories are, to put it mildly, thought-provoking.

For the most part, the stories in this book are not tragedies. This is, personally, to my liking; sad endings are a pet peeve of mine, especially when the sad ending is tacked on for the sole purpose of being a sad ending, of being “realistic”. There are, of course, exceptions, both to my opinions and to the stories in this book. Another of my favorite stories in the book is “The Herds Are Charging through the Room.” This is the one that begins “Mother is crying”. And she CONTINUES crying. What if, instead of roaches or mice, our houses could become infested with something bigger? And, when one has lived a hard life, does it perhaps feel as though something like that has been happening and is continuing to happen?

“The front door is gone. It has been pounded into nothingness, it has shattered into millions of minuscule pieces which scatter throughout the room from the thrash and sway of the animals. The house rumbles, trembles from the constant striking of hooves against the bare wooden floor. / We try to ignore the disorder, pretend it is not happening, we try to reach out to mother and ease the pain, but the din in more than we can bear…. We try to comfort her – we, her sons, who have inherited this land, who have had to cope with the wilderness ever since we were born – we shout at her over the deafening clamor. “Mother,” we beg, “can’t you forget what has happened? Can’t you put the herds to rest?” No she can’t.

“We try to convince her it’s not her fault, that the herds have come on their own… but she wails on, on and on… you never can tell why things happen the way they do. That’s what mother has always told us. You can never know what horrible things will take place in the wilderness where men and beasts are bound to clash, she still warns us, where men slaughter men and women sit helpless against the violence they must endure, where any move, sudden or not, the flash of lightening, perhaps, the swift clap of thunder, is apt to spark a stampede you will surely be unable to reverse…”

No, this one does not end happily. But even sadder, even more horrific, is the entirety, ending and all, of “The Keepers”. This story also features beasts. What if there are some childhoods that are, every minute, every second, horrible? In reality, there are and have been. And in some fiction there are and have been. I’m thinking of Ursula leGuin’s “Those Who Walk Away from Omelas”. In that story Omelas (acronym of “O Salem”) is a town in which everyone is happy except for one lone child, who must be kept in a squalid room, fed and clothed minimally, not actually tortured but living a life of torment. For some undisclosed reason this must be, to ensure the happiness of the rest of the town. That’s ONE child. In Maggio’s story it’s a house, with many children; every once in a while, one child must be chosen to feed the beasts; the beasts must be fed. This does not ensure the *happiness* of the others in the household; it merely seems to ensure their continued existence, which is as grim as it’s possible to be. Our narrator, one of the children, tries to escape. But fifty years pass and he doesn’t. Of course he’s not a child any more, and I felt what I often feel when an unhappy childhood has passed into an unhappy adulthood, when even if it passes into a happy adulthood… well, all hope of a happy childhood is gone. I don’t know whether our author has this or something else in mind, but I believe that the worth of any piece of writing can be measured by whether it invokes *anything* in the reader, anything at all.

And I’ll say, quickly, that the titular story, “Letters from Inside”, is another with a not-happy ending.

One slightly-recurrent theme in this book is: the protagonist was not always in this predicament, they have a past, a normal and pleasant past, with loved ones, perhaps a significant other. The theme I’m thinking of is, where is that other *now*? Why is that other not writing/visiting/not betraying? Was that other part of the plot to begin with? “What’s the latest in cuisines, Mary?” asks Jack, our letter-writer. “What do the restaurants look like nowadays? I’m starving, Mary, and you’re my only source, the only one ever willing to risk writing to me. Why don’t you answer? Why do I wait and receive no letter? Mary, what have I done? Mary, please, you’ve got to answer me. Tell me you’re alive. Tell me you’re OK…” And in “The Last Laugh” Raven in the hospital asks, again and again, Where was Ruth?

Most of these stories are surreal. But some aren’t. In particular, two are about what men do to women – or, perhaps, what our society does to both. Our author is a man but he seems to be able to think like a woman. And he made a good decision, to place those two as the first and the last. In the first, “The Old Olive Tree”, s young girl does her rite of passage under that tree; she knows what to do wrt. males and all the males she has the opportunity to know are not terribly worthy, in particular her father and the man she eventually marries. “That’s the way a man is,” she narrates, in the first paragraph. And, towards the end, “… Foced to accept the only boy in town who would have me. Not that he’s an angel. None of them are, Lord knows…”

The last story in the book is titled “The Men Have Come to Fix the Drain”. Perhaps the opening sentence says it all, even predicts the ending: “One of them is in the bathroom, the other is in the bedroom talking with Mommy.” I like to think that nothing untoward ensues in the bathroom, where our 12-year-old narrator is hanging out, but we know for sure that something untoward is happening in the bedroom. And the absent father is a sort of villain.

Another recurrent theme of the book has to do with identity, or lack of. In many of the stories, the questions arises: Is this character one and the same as that character, and is that character one and the same as the other character? As we’ve seen, “Suddenly, There Was Harold” begins
“Henry was a flower.” And soon Henry chooses to become a butterfly. He also changes his name. Or he already goes by another name. He then assumes further identities, and names,eventually choosing to become “a worn panel on the fading wall”. This is one of the stories without a sad ending. We can’t conclude “happy”, either; the last paragraph uses the words “verily ever after” and “as validly as could be expected”. At any rate, our flower does assume his final identity.

It is said that one possible way to interpret a dream is to assume that each of the characters in the dream is actually the dreamer, or some aspect of; in particular, each of the characters (and sometimes objects) is one and the same as each of the others. So perhaps that’s the case with some *stories*, in particular first-person stories; every person, indeed every object, in such a story might represent some aspect of the narrator. At any rate, that occurs to me when I think of “Suddenly There Was Harold”, the story described in the previous paragraph, as well as to many of the other stories, such as “A Sort of Santa Claus”. WHO is “a sort of Santa Claus”? Our protagonist, the kindly generous and talented toymaker? The wooden boy he creates, wishing he could have a son like that? The boy who mysteriously appears seeking a job in the store, whose kindness and generosity matches that of the toymaker, and who causes business to thrive even more than it already has? The equally mysterious but also equally kindly and generous old and decrepid old man, who causes a turn in the plot? Or the unkindly, ungenerous, bitter wife of the toymaker, who eventually makes a turnaround? Are they ALL “sorts of Santa Claus”? Are they all Santa Claus?

“About Being Caspar Crump” is another example. It is indeed about just that. But as the story proceeds, more and more Caspar Crumps creep into it. And, as usual in Maggio’s stories, that’s not the end of it. There reappears one of his recurring characters, the bureaucracy, which leads to a Karkaesque ending. And the several Caspar Crumps never meet one another, even though they might be one and the same person. Or at least have one and the same name. I might perhaps mention that I googled “Caspar Crump” and found that there’s a real one, a Danish actor. There’s also a Crump Park, in the state of Virginia. So Crump doesn’t seem to be as horrible a name as the Crump is our story perceives.

Of course, the story most obviously about identity is titled “The Other”. I couldn’t quite understand it, but I got something out of it. Here are some lines that I came away with, sentences that perhaps constitute, in some way, a microcosm of the story. First sentence: “’What’s it like for you?’ he asked”. A later sentence: “What shall I find that I have not found before?” And “What have I missed?” Still later, “What did I not do that the other had?” and “Is this how it’s supposed to be?” Can one sentient being exist in two places? I have asked elsewhere. And if so, what does that feel like?

Which brings us to “Metamorphosis II”. This story involves a switch of identity, a reverse-metamorphosis, the opposite of Kafka’s. Here’s a sample passage which illustrates Maggio’s talent as a writer of poetic prose. “He felt as if his hard, smooth skin were melting, as if, one by one, his legs were falling off, and he had the strangest sensation hat his body was beginning to grow. .. The lamp on the table appeared smaller, and the couch, on which he loved to scramble, seemed as it it had shrunk. Indeed, the thought of scurrying along the soft upholstery no longer excited him. Even the ceiling… no longer had any appeal.” This story is one of those writerly creations about which I sigh, “Why didn’t I think of that?” But if I had, I wouldn’t have done as much with it as Maggio did. In particular, I couldn’t have been that political, or not the way Maggio is. Maggio knows details about the inner workings of the above-mentioned bureaucracy/corruption, which is a huge chunk of his subject-matter. That’s all I’ll say, except that humor is also a mark of this author. E.g., The politician in this story is named David C. Roche.

To re-emphasize: these stories are great! Pretty much every word held my attention. The mixture of political and personal signals multiple meanings, many possibilities, and a reason for this writer to keep writing.