

The Book Shelf

Title: *Explaining Life: The Wisdom of Modern Jewish Poetry, 1960-2010*

Author: Eleanor Ehrenkrantz

Reviewed by E. Mangel

The poems in this collection, *Explaining Life: The Wisdom of Modern Jewish Poetry, 1960-2010* – some written originally in Yiddish and Hebrew – do “pierce the heart,” and educate it as well. These are poems about major issues in daily life – love, loss, alienation, family relationships, the after-effects of war, death and renewal – which help us reflect on how we are living and suggest possible ways to cope with and to improve our lives.

Facing difficult situations directly by pinpointing scenes from life is a poet’s job. And it is a cathartic experience for the reader. A mother’s suffering when her son goes off to one of the many wars in Israel, does “encapsulate the agony of the Middle East” in Dina Yehuda’s *Soldier Son*:



now twenty one, you aim at unseen enemies
as rocket propelled grenades smash through windows
in abandoned houses in villages whose names
I can't pronounce.
God's voice shatters the cedars of Lebanon
your voice shatters my heart.

And sometimes loss is depicted in a more whimsical way, as in *Branch Library* by Edward Hirsch:

I wish I could find that skinny, long-beaked boy
who perched in the branches of the old branch library.
I'd give anything to find that birdy boy again
bursting out into the dusky blue afternoon
with his satchel of scrawls and scribbles,
radiating heat, singing with joy.

The loss of carefree childhood is eloquently depicted here, with a sun-filled picture of a bookish young boy. The section on love is comprised of a variety of expressions. The beginning of courtship is illustrated by Ruth Whitman in the poem *Your Call* as she writes about a girl waiting a long time for a phone call that finally comes:

When your voice – like fire from a star –
Burst through the kitchen telephone
And I saw light, sunlight on the branches
As I took you in.

Each section of this book gives us poems which may either help us recollect tiny incidents from our lives, or portray possible vignettes. In the *Renewal* section, Yehoshua November does both. In his *Partners in Creation* he claims that God creates the world, again and again, in different ways:

the way a child's world is renewed
when he comes home from school
and his father and mother
still live in the same house,
and he hears them *talking* at the kitchen table.

And in his *In the Unseeable World*, he creates a possible, mystical connection between God and man when he depicts a passerby watching a man praying inside

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ing inside a shul. The man stretches his arms heavenward and “Hashem’s/long arms reach through the eternal/water and the firmament/and His hands cleave/ to the hands of the man who is praying,” but the man passing by just says, “Oh, why does he waste his energy, what does he hope to touch?” The believer achieves his goal but the nonbeliever sees and receives nothing, is the message. Further enlightenment comes from Jacob Glatstein’s *Praying the Sunset Prayer* in which Glatstein teaches the importance of the third and last prayer of the day that Orthodox Jewish men say at evening time:

The day is departing with a quiet kiss.
It lies open at your feet
while you stand saying the blessings.
how you age with the days
that keep dawning,
how you bring your lived-out day
as a gift to eternity.

Many poems in this book deal with mother-daughter and mother-son relationships, some sad, some humorous. Other poems relate father-son, father-daughter relationships which are tender. The book has something for everyone to feel and to respond to.