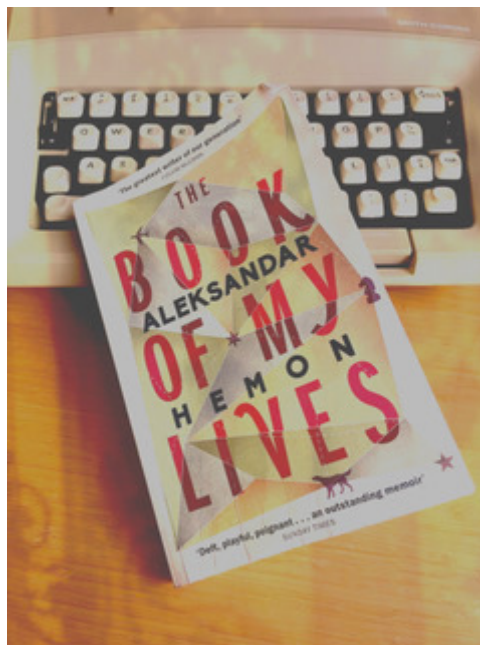


REVIEW

To Simply Be — A Review of Aleksandar Hemon's "The Book of My Lives"

by Qing Xu



Aleksandar Hemon's 'The Book of My Lives'

“Truth is stranger than fiction,” opined Mark Twain. In this collection of “real stories” — as the writer Aleksandar Hemon puts it himself — readers would find realities recounted to be more dramatic, more surreal, and more intimate than fiction, as they lose themselves in these stories about the harsh political climate in 1990s Bosnia, the grittiness of besieged Sarajevo, and the persistent quest for meaning in life.

Once, Professor Koljević told us about the book his daughter had begun writing at the age of five. She had titled it ‘The Book of My Life,’ but had written only the first chapter. She planned to wait for more life to accumulate, he told us, before starting Chapter 2.

This bemusing anecdote, recorded by the Bosnian American writer Aleksandar Hemon in his 2013 nonfiction collection *The Book of My Lives* (2013), is apparently the inspiration for this book’s title. The story-telling urge is an innate desire in human-beings, whether one is five or fifty years old. And nowadays, fueled by social media and a time that proselytizes the idea of the individual self, we would find ourselves flooded by “life books.” However, this collection of autobiographical essays — all but one previously published in magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *Granta* — has certainly distinguished itself from its peers, with its page-turning events, whimsical digressions, rich metaphors, as well as a great sense of sincerity and candidness.

As its name suggests, this is a book that chronicles not one life, but many “lives.” Hemon claims himself to be “a cluster of others.” He has recorded not only lives that he has lived — his early life in Sarajevo before the siege, his immigrant life in Chicago, the lives of his two marriages — but also lives he has witnessed: the disturbingly enigmatic life of a poet-turned-warmonger Professor Nikola Koljeić, the lives of his and his best friend’s dogs during the Bosnian War, his best friend Veba’s eventful life, and his second daughter’s life.

Intertextual References

As an erudite author, Hemon has woven intricate intertextual references from both literature and movies into these stories, creating artistic echoes and extending the depth of his work.

For example, the story “Dog Lives” was originally titled “War Dogs” when first published in *Granta* in 2012, a clear reference to Steven Spielberg’s 2011 movie “War Horse.” Like “War Horse,” “Dog Lives” also traces the moving lives of animals and their owners during the war.



Aleksandar Hemon © Creative Commons

Another example of intertextual references is the story “The Magic Mountain.” The title refers both to the mountain near Sarajevo where the author spent each summer alone in his late twenties and the namesake novel by Thomas Mann that he was reading the very summer before the Siege of Sarajevo.

Mann’s *Bildungsroman* features a young man called Hans Castorp, who, afflicted with tuberculosis, stays in a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps. Likewise, each summer Hemon used to move to his family’s mountain cabin in Jahorina, where he lived like a cloistered monk. Here, he used to spend most of his waking hours reading, so much so that he would enter a literary trance. He confessed that he chose this ascetic ritual because of inner unrest he experienced in his twenties, when wars kept looming in the background. Literature became, in another sense, a mountain, as it provided a shelter for him and it nurtured, soothed as well as cleansed his soul. It created a bubble, inside which he was safe, and could temporarily forget about the impending civil war.

But still, the deteriorating news on the TV and an incident in which his pet dog Mek was nearly shot dead by a military unit back from an ethnic cleansing task, shoved reality into his face. In the end, he realized that “there was no longer a book to read or a story to write that could possibly help it ever recover.”

His fate is different from that of Hans Castorp, who joins the army and dies on the battlefield of WWI, while Hemon was invited to visit the US by American Cultural Center, leaving the mountain and the war behind.

Displacement and Connectedness

The war left Hemon stranded in the US, an unwilling immigrant, forced to leave his hometown behind and settle into his new adoptive city — Chicago. He writes about his displacement and sporadic sense of connectedness through the angle of sports in the story “If God Existed, He’d Be a Solid Midfielder.”

While for him “playing soccer was closely related to being fully alive”, his American colleagues — as he jestingly puts it — “deemed rolling joints as physical exercise.” Sometimes they play a lazy softball, whose rules (like many other rules in this country) he has yet to understand.

But one day he encounters a pickup community soccer team, made of immigrants from all over the world. He joins the team, which is organized every weekend by an Ecuadoran UPS driver called “German” (named because his father was born in Germany). German drives his battered UPS van, loaded with footballs, T-shirts, nets and poles, and referees for them. He does all of this out of his love for God.

Like German, other players are also nicknamed after their countries of origin and Hemon becomes Bosnia. In this little “United Nations” of his, he feels connected to a world that is larger than the U.S. and learns that you can still live in a new country while having shared memories with someone else.

This sense of connection is felt most intensely in perhaps the most beautiful moment of the whole book, which

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"The Book of My Lives" by Aleksandar Hemon

happens during a sultry summer afternoon, a few weeks before German would retire and move to Florida. A sudden downpour strikes the soccer field and interrupts their game. Hemon presents this moment in a cinematic way. All the players are shown in perfect blocking, like characters in a film shot. First German, Chilean, and him are framed in the lens — they are taking shelter in the UPS van, talking about selfless giving and New Age concepts, which sets the tone for what is going to happen. Then a comic digression spices up the atmosphere a bit: Hakeem, a Nigerian, asks them if they have seen his keys. They ask him to forget about his keys in such a downpour, when after a while they realize he is actually saying *kids*. Following Hakeem’s movement, the camera now shifts to L alas and his wife, both trapped in the torrential rain. Following their eyes, and with the narrative energy gradually building, finally comes the climax — despite the deluge of rain, the Tibetans in their team were playing beside themselves in the field.

The ground is giving off vapors, the mist touching their ankles, and at moments it seems that they’re levitating above the flood.

Levitate, to float in the air as if by superpower. And a flood is full of biblical connotations. Earlier in the story, Hemon even compared the broken UPS van they were taking refuge in from the rain to Noah's Ark. Besides these Christian symbols, Hemon also introduces Buddhism to the scene by comparing the serene-looking Tibetan goalie to the Dalai Lama.

The downpour creates an enclosed space, which is detached from the normalcy of daily life, where those immigrants always feel displaced. Inside this space, they "occupy an ideal position on the field," entitled to each inch of land under their feet. They are no longer disoriented and lonely in this new country, but are deeply connected with one another.

It is a deeply moving moment, albeit short-lived. Hemon rounds up the story with a Woolfian touch, claiming what has all happened to be "a vague, physical, orgasmic memory of the evanescent instant when you were completely connected with everything and everyone around you."

"Patina"

In this book we also find a parable recounted by an Italian immigrant, Lido, who used to restore Renaissance artworks in Italy. The story he relates is about several amateurs trying to restore the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. They used "solvent and sponges to take the patina off the frescoes". When they realize they were doing more harm than good, they turn to Lido. Lido sends them a long letter filled with invective, pointing out that "the patina is the essential part of the fresco".

When Lido is narrating this anecdote, he is so vexed that he slides off the ball he was sitting on and tumbles onto the ground.

It is a farcical moment, but Hemon manages to look beyond the simple event: "Lido was one of those rare humans who achieved completion", for he was able to "simply, unconditionally be."

After reading this book, there was a similar sense of this "patina" I've had a peek at. The lives recorded are not without struggles, but are acutely lived and observed. This is a book that shows an author with an exceptional sensibility, a catcher of exquisite moments in life. It is a dialogue that invites more dialogue, and an echo that strikes up another echo. It is something that will always stay with you after you have long put it down.