

One Day in April

Jad El Hage

Fiction

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SUGAR STREET REVIEW

Visiting Lebanon is a wonderfully complex experience. It's a place full of contradictions and contrasts, of mosques next to churches, five star hotels next to bombed out buildings and Hezbollah camps next to perfectly restored boulevards; the progressive morals of Beirut cohabiting with the more conservative rural traditions. El Hage, in his new novella, *One Day in April*, goes as far as to say 'Lebanon is more like a state of mind than a real country' and jokes that, because in the country the 'whole world is a stage', Shakespeare must have in fact been a Lebanese man called Shaykh Al-Sabir. For the visitor it is possible to get a superficial impression of this 'state of mind.' Beirut is sexy and hedonic. As the sun sets, one can almost feel the lust and epicureanism take over as the young Lebanese wend their way to the next drug-fuelled superclub. However, only by reading books such as *Beirut, I Love You*, Zena El Khalil's wonderful memoir of her experiences living in the city during the 2006 Lebanese-Israeli conflict and, now, *One Day in April*, are we privy to the true ethos of the city.

This short novel follows the experiences of a young Lebanese-Armenian photographer, Koko, over the course of 13th April, 2007, exactly two years after the outbreak of civil war. As with the two great American novellas of the 20th Century, *The Great Gatsby* and *Catcher in the Rye*, little happens during the actual story. However, what El Hage does brilliantly is to portray the Zeitgeist of civil war Lebanon; creativity being stifled by hash, opium and death and people burying themselves in sex, drugs and art, all the time waiting for the bullet with their name on it. It's a book about 'the second generation, a generation that was crushed by the civil war before reaching its potential, scattered all over the globe and largely forgotten.' Adam Gopnik said of Salinger's defining work, 'no book has ever captured a city

better than *Catcher in the Rye* captured New York in the fifties' while *The Great Gatsby* perfectly depicted the spirit and emotions of prohibition American. El Hage, while his writing is not as tight as these two examples, manages to achieve a similar effect.

His prose improves as the book goes on. Initially the register strikes a discord, too chatty and colloquial. However, in the second third of the book he seems to find his voice which continues to strengthen. Some of his descriptions are wonderfully original and evocative, describing the moustache of one character as 'drooping like the blades of a Yemeni dagger,' being just one example. The metaphor of life as a train ride is also especially memorable and insightful, in particular as he describes the train 'approaching Puberty, swerving a little, shaking a little, letting in the dreams, letting them sneak into your body, your flesh becoming your best friend and worst enemy,' just one of many paradoxes he discusses. The tempo of the writing, particularly towards the end of the book, cleverly reflects the state of mind of the individual characters, speeding up when at their most manic and slowing when at their more lucid.

The contrast and conflict between the mercurial yet brilliant antagonist, Nader, and the more reserved Koko is set intelligently against the backdrop of contrast and conflict that is happening around them. As El Hage tries to understand how countrymen are able to kill each other, Koko is forced to deal with the paradox that 'regardless of how much [he] wished [Nader] had never been born, [he] didn't want him to die.' Furthermore, by setting much of the novel in rural surroundings, the author gives us a completely different viewpoint and a stark comparison to Beirut. The Bedouins who live in the Bekaa Valley are almost an anachronism, their vendettas straight from 19th Century Southern Italy. Yet at the same time they are in touch with modernity. Perhaps most significantly though, by choosing an Armenian as the protagonist, El Hage broaches one of the biggest ironies of the novel and indeed the era; that a race of people forced out of their homeland by a genocide, little known about in the West, were then forced to return because civil war in their adopted country left it even more dangerous.

Ultimately, this is a very poignant commentary about the lives of people living in an oxymoronic land of 'blood and treason and treachery and deception and heartbreak and lies and fratricide,' perhaps best summed up through the fact that Koko is famous for a shot of an Israeli soldier defecating. 'An Israeli's ass has more impact on the collective Lebanese memory than the terrified faces and shredded flesh of its own people.'