

Antidote to Ailing Fiction

By Catherine Browder

Book Review:

Anatolia and Other Stories, by Anis Shivani,
Black Lawrence Press, 2008.



For nearly 20 years, I have mulled over the core arguments of a critical essay published in *The Georgia Review*; and although the title and author have long vanished from my memory, the author's amazement at the narrowness of contemporary American fiction has not. The critic pondered why only genre writers were tackling the major cultural, environmental, or political issues of the day. Why were writers of "mainstream" fiction denying themselves so much of the world? Why, he posed (and I grossly summarize), were the most prevalent topics so personal and parochial: divorce, the death of a parent, the lunatic-in-the-woods?

Every few years since, I have read another such article in which the disappointed essayist points out how current American fiction has, in some way, betrayed its readership. Among the more recent critics is Anis Shivani. In an essay entitled "Why Is American Fiction in Its Current Dismal State?" (*Pleiades*, 27 no. 1), he observes that the popularity of memoir is harming fiction, especially the novel. We live in a "culture of confession," he writes. Typical memoirs teem with self-revelation but not necessarily psychological insight. Where, he wonders, are the boldly imaginative works? Why are *politics* and *commitment* so strenuously avoided? And why aren't "establishment" reviewers concerned about this phenomenon?

To come to writing from a strong moral position, some belief in universal values that makes one sleepless and distraught, will be like a fat, bald, ugly man crashing in on a slumber party of blonde supermodels.

So a reviewer approaches Shivani's first story collection, *Anatolia and Other Stories*, curious to discover whether his fiction will offer the "bold imagination" and engagement he admires. It does. The international scope of his work offers readers a startling array of settings, situations, and characters. A sampling: the complex interactions of an extended Indian family at a reunion in Pondicherry; a clash among preservationists at the Boston Museum of Art; a Gypsy family transplanted to Indiana; an academic American couple who become unsuitable parents to a Vietnamese orphan; and the story of a suicide bombing in Tehran, told backward.

Three standout stories deserve special attention. Set in 1942, "Manzanar" is told as a series of journal entries by a 60-year-old Japanese internee. Jim Hosokawa's 42 years as an American offer an impressive profile of jobs, but in his current situation he has become invisible. Indignities abound—as an old man, as an *Issei*. He struggles not to become, as he says, ". . . what they want us to become."

Hosokawa has no regard for the young self-appointed *Nisei* barracks guards ("blockheads," he calls them). He observes the factionalism growing in the barracks, the tension over who might be an *inu* (a traitorous dog). Never married, he develops an attraction for two women, one of them the Caucasian assistant camp director who flatters him with her attention. Hosokawa asks early on,

How is it we thought we could become fully American, one hundred percent American, unassailably patriotic American, and get away with it for so long?

In "Dubai," Ram Pillai has diligently guest-worked in the Emirates for 35 years and now wants to return to India, where he could marry at last. Although a Hindu, he often attends Friday services.

The mosque is the only place in Dubai where national and foreigner, citizen and guest, rich and poor, stand side by side, see each other's faces without feint or filter. In the mosque, all faces are empty of demand.

Years before, however, Pillai witnessed an accident and generously helped the hapless driver avoid attention. Afterward, his life as a menial worker became strangely easier. On the day he has set aside to bid farewell to his benefactors and friends, his one-way ticket in a pocket, Pillai is waylaid by an Emirati in dark glasses, who indirectly drags that distant event into the present, and Pillai's powerlessness unfolds.

The title story, "Anatolia," opens in the coastal town of Alanya during the rule of Ahmed III (circa 1725). As he watches the colorful sails of the galleons head for port, Kadi Ahmed Efendi, one of four narrators, ruefully comments on the growing materialism of his provincial home: "If you could spend, why save?" Efendi, a judge, or *kadi*, must pass judgment the next day on a successful merchant—a Jew—who has piqued the envy of others and whose guilt he doubts. However, to show lenience (admired in Istanbul but not in the outposts of Anatolia) could ruin his standing and the respect of many.

Meanwhile, Neslihan Hanim, a learned and opinionated young woman, has read the recently translated *Robinson Crusoe* and tells her weary father, "Reading great works of the imagination was the only rescue for the soul." Hanim also enjoys strictly chaperoned conversations with her father's good friend, Noah ibn Nehmias, whose laughter, intelligence and stories of Venice thrill her. They joke about the stupidity of the Padishah's spies and infiltrators, whose favorite import from Europe is tulips.

Unfortunately, Nehmias is the Jewish merchant whose case Kadi Efendi must consider. Hanim's father, Mustafa, will appear as Nehmias' witness; for he has hopes his daughter, who distains marriage, will finally consider Nehmias. As we move from narrator to narrator, the situation is revealed in a discursive manner; and each viewpoint enlarges our understanding of the precarious legal and social environment under the Padishah.

Throughout, Shivani employs a ruminative style that allows for richly textured telling, conveyed in graceful and intelligent language that consistently serves the story. His stories do not rely on an epiphany of revelation, a narrative strategy he finds limited and

overworked. Instead, a Shivani story accumulates. The stronger pieces gather strength through leisurely unfolding and the gradual accretion of carefully selected detail, insightful asides, and pertinent dramatized events. His is a controlled, quiet voice. Furthermore, the range of subjects on display in *Anatolia* reclaims the word *cosmopolitan* from the clutches of fashion, restoring it to what I take to be its true meaning—a mature mind (and imagination) that looks outward to embrace the globe.