BOOK REVIEWS

Emma Donoghue, *Akin*
New York: HarperCollins, 2019
352 pages, $32.99, ISBN 9781443458948

"*Hard not to read the situation metaphorically*." With these italicized words at the beginning of *Akin*, Emma Donoghue invites the reader to interpret her novel metaphorically. This italicized invitation is uttered by the protagonist Noah Selvaggio's dead wife Joan, who is Jewish, and it introduces Nice's Jewish history during WWII, which takes up much of the background of the novel. By linking an old man packing his bags to the roundup of Jewish children during the Holocaust, Donoghue thrusts the reader into the maw of metaphoric reading.

Metaphor implies likeness or similarity and is therefore connected to the title, *Akin*, which is defined at the beginning of the book as "similar in character." Donoghue explores not only what it means to be akin but also the nature of kinship. Indeed, *Akin* is the story of a family tree, and the title of the opening chapter, "The Call," refers not only to a phone call from Noah's family but also to the call of family itself, which leads him to begin a new life. As his Jewish friend Vivienne, who engages in *tikkun olam,* tells him: "Don't underestimate the blood ties . . . . Like calls to like." This call to likeness and metaphor is part of textual *tikkun*.

The title of the middle chapter, "Neither Here nor There," tells us much about the rest of the novel. This phrase is related to one of the origins of the name Nice, as the city was traded between France and Italy and its name was derived from "*ne-za*," which literally means "neither here." Nice is thus an in-between place, which is neither here nor there, and the chapter ends with Noah realizing that he is also "neither here nor there," as he is at home neither in Nice nor in New York. The "in-between" state of Donoghue's fiction thus works on many levels—from language to history to character development.

Names are also important in the novel. Consider, for example, the hidden identities of Jewish children in Nice in the 1940s as well as Noah's mother, Margot, who helped to save these children and whose mysterious name during those years is eventually uncovered. The name of Noah's grandfather, Pierre Personnet, also changes to Père Sonne, which means "no one" as well as "father ringing." Noah's great-nephew Michael translates this name as "Nodaddy Ding," which refers to missing fathers who call or ring their children. Noah participates in this name game by abbreviating his grandfather's name with the initials P.S., which also stand for *postscriptum*. The novel thus provides an endless chain of word play involving names.

Once he goes to school in New York, Noah changes his French name, Noé, because of the "no way" taunting of other schoolchildren. His name still resonates, however, as his surname Selvaggio "sounds like *salvage*, but it's actually from *savage*." These two meanings also apply to his great-nephew—a wild child who manages to salvage Noah by the end of the novel: "This boy was saving Noah . . . Michael was the little ark." The protagonist's name thus evokes a biblical allusion, which is further emphasized by the appearance of an olive sapling.

Caught between the past and the future, Nice and New York, Noah eventually embarks on a new life. He also learns a new language to communicate with his great-nephew: "It was exhausting having to translate almost every word into vocabulary he imagined an eleven-year-old would know." Words rub against each other in their conversations, where "ludicrous" becomes the rapper "Ludacris."

Photographs also evoke metaphorical connections. Consider, for example, Père Sonne's black-and-white print *Tuyeau de Cuisine* (Kitchen Pipe). As Noah explains, his grandfather's kitchen pipe is not just a pipe: "See how the pipe curves just above the floor, as if it's a tired person who's longing to sit down." Extending the metaphor, Noah compares the shadow to blood, thereby invoking *Akin*'s bloodlines and casualties of war, not the least of which is his father's loss of a hand. Much like her cropped photographs, Donoghue also crops her narrative so that meaning and mystery reside just beneath the surface.

Like photography, chemistry and science in general are central to Noah's life, and he instructs his great-nephew in the ways of the periodic table by invoking a family tree. He also refers to Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and Erwin Schrödinger's cat experiment: "I have good news and

bad news." Noah's relationship to Michael and metaphor similarly embodies the uncertainty principle in Donoghue's experiment. To figure out Margot's identity as a photographer who altered identities to save lives, Noah also draws a Venn diagram of overlapping traits. This diagram comes full circle at the end of the novel when Noah and Michael lean their heads against each other, which metaphorically implies that they, too, are overlapping.

Akin is ultimately a Venn diagram where characters are alien yet akin. Another metaphorical image also serves to capture the 69-year gap between Michael and Noah, as they are described as "a smooth sapling beside a gnarled oak." Donoghue explains the law of closure by noting that the "viewer fills in what they don't see." In a similar way, metaphoric reading also serves to fill in those gaps.

—Michael Greenstein

Ryan Patrick Hanley, *Our Great Purpose: Adam Smith and Living a Better Life*
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019
157 pages, $17.95, ISBN 9780691179445

Best known for *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), the book that established the fundamental principles of free-market economics, Adam Smith had written an earlier book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), which went through several editions in his lifetime and attracted many prominent readers. Robert Burns, for one, agreed with Smith's observation that remorse is the most painful human sentiment, which prompted him to write a poem on the subject, "Remorse—A Fragment" (1784). Other readers, like Thomas Jefferson, believed that our innate moral sense rendered the study of moral philosophy superfluous.

Smith felt so strongly about his moral treatise that he spent the last years of his life preparing a new edition, which appeared in June 1790, the month before his death. One regrets in retrospect that Smith did not write something new when he was at the peak of his intellectual powers instead of revising a thirty-year-old book. From 1790, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was regularly reprinted until 1822, when it went out of print. It was reissued in 1853 as part of Bohn's Standard Library, and it was frequently reprinted in this series into the twentieth century, but the outbreak of World War I altered the concepts of good and evil so greatly that *The Theory of*

Moral Sentiments seemed hopelessly outdated. It remained out of print for the next half century.

Ryan Patrick Hanley has made two attempts to revive the reputation of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In 2009 he prepared the 250th anniversary edition for Penguin. That same year he published a book-length study, *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue*. His latest book, *Our Great Purpose: Adam Smith on Living a Better Life*, covers much the same ground but takes a different approach. The book is divided into twenty-nine short chapters, each discussing a different sentence excerpted from Smith's work. Outlining his method in the introduction, Hanley says he will not reduce Smith's "concerns with the philosophy of living to practical maxims of the sort one finds in the work of Smith's friend Benjamin Franklin or in today's self-help books," but his put-down of Franklin seems unfair. Both Smith and Franklin wrote moral philosophy, but they took different rhetorical and stylistic approaches. Whereas Smith wrote a cohesive treatise of moral philosophy for polite readers, Franklin wrote clear, memorable maxims to bring his moral philosophy to as wide a readership as possible. While saying he would not reduce Smith to practical maxims, Hanley attempts to do just that. But Smith was no Poor Richard. His writings do not lend themselves to pithy excerpts. Look at *Bartlett's* or other collections of familiar quotations. Rarely do they quote Smith. In *The Wealth of Nations* Smith says, "Science is the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition." Otherwise, his writings yield few maxims.

Hanley's chapter titles—"On Friendship," "On Pleasure," "On Wisdom and Virtue"—echo the titles Francis Bacon and Michel de Montaigne used for their essays, although he lacks the literary style of his models, as his excerpts from Smith are neither clear nor memorable. Indeed, they are so muddy that Hanley must paraphrase each to make it comprehensible. For example, the chapter "On Dignity" begins with the following sentence from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*: "When he views himself in the light in which he is conscious that others will view him, he sees that to them he is but one of the multitude in no respect better than any other in it." Hanley follows this wordy sentence with the following paraphrase: "You aren't any better than anyone else—and nobody else is any better than you." The text reveals that this paraphrase is something Hanley's grandmother used to say. After impugning Franklin's folk wisdom, in other words, he reverts to folk wisdom himself in order to make Smith comprehensible.

Smith was also notoriously absent-minded, and an anecdote that illustrates his absent-mindedness can shed light on *Our Great Purpose*. One morning Smith's friend John Damer visited him for breakfast. While eating they enjoyed a lively conversation. Without interrupting his discourse, Smith buttered a piece of bread, rolled it around, plopped it into the teapot, and poured in some hot water. Shortly thereafter, he poured himself a cup only to declare that it was the worst tea he had ever tasted. "I have not the least doubt of it," Damer replied, "for you have made it of bread and butter instead of tea." With *Our Great Purpose* Hanley has created an incongruous concoction akin to Smith's cup of tea. You can't make a cuppa from a slice of bread, and you can't make a book of maxims from a treatise on moral philosophy.

— Kevin J. Hayes, University of Central Oklahoma

Alexander Laidlaw, *Dead Flowers*
Gibsons, BC: Nightwood Editions, 2019
200 pages, $19.95, ISBN 9780889713550

Alexander Laidlaw's debut collection of short stories is best summed up in "Then She Smiled and Walked Away": "I think that in fact we spend so much of our lives just waiting for something to happen, that we begin to forget we are waiting, and we begin to believe that things are happening, when the truth is that, really, they're not." Taken by itself, this position is harmless if somewhat angsty and uninspired. Unfortunately, it is this position that holds true for the stories themselves. The reader waits and waits for something to happen and is ultimately unsurprised by the end of the collection when nothing ever does. If it is the case that nothing ever happens, one wonders why the reader should be subjected to such mundanity. Likely this mundanity is precisely the point, and the title *Dead Flowers* resembles a kind of warning sign, cautioning the reader that within lies dry and lifeless decor. Unfortunately this critic does not accept that it is the writer's task to bore.

The prose is neat and direct and there are, amidst the mundanity, rare moments of profundity. "War Story" is the strongest story in the collection. At a concert with a colleague and his partner the narrator suddenly realizes, "I don't know who I am anymore, I don't know who I'm with and I don't

know where we are or what we're doing here." Moments like this one suggest that Laidlaw is capable of instilling his work with a sense of depth. He also demonstrates the ability to inject his work with conflict at times, when in the same scene his colleague pushes shots of Scotch on him despite his resistance, the beverages becoming exponentially more expensive as the night carries on. Third, he does seem to stumble upon moments of action, as when the same colleague is hit by a vehicle, but he tends to retreat from these moments as quickly as possible. Despite all of these positive notes, this scene is lost within the context of the broader story, which revolves around the narrator's displeasure with his situation at work—a story that lacks intrigue.

But Laidlaw is capable of intrigue, as he shows in "You're Getting Older." The main character, Marcelo, finds himself intoxicated and accosted by an elderly woman, who begs him to come into her home to help her lift another elderly woman off the floor. There are even elements of conflict when they argue about whether he should stay, whether they should call an ambulance, and whether he should accept money for his trouble. Unfortunately those conflicts are readily resolved and offer no climax, and the story quickly peters out, as do the others.

The longest of the stories, "About Franklin," has the least to offer in terms of plot. Two girls like the same boy. Two boys like the same girl. The girl that both of the boys like dates both of the boys in turn. One of the boys has an affair with the other girl. The story ends.

This critic has decidedly avoided acknowledging the final "story" in the collection. "The No-Cry Sleep Solution" appears to act as a kind of "skeleton key," the purpose of which is to unlock the rest of the collection by referencing several characters and scenes. The quasi-poetic style is such a departure from the neat prose of the other stories and is so tangled, confused, and effectively undecipherable that it renders itself negligible.

In *Dead Flowers*, Laidlaw falls into the tedious trap of writing about mundanity in a manner that subjects his readers to that same mundanity. It is an oddly ambitious undertaking to stifle the fundamental components of a story, and it is one that perhaps requires seasoning or a change in direction. This critic would suggest that for his next collection the writer should challenge the position put forward in this one, for though it may well be the case that nothing ever really happens, the reader should not be forced to dwell on this.

—Caleb Harrison