ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

**Separations: Two Novels of Mothers and Children**
Massimo Bontempelli
Estelle Gilson, translator
McPherson and Company Publishers
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The literary style of magical realism, usually associated with Latin American writers Jorge Luis Borges and Alejo Carpentier, actually has an Italian ancestry in Massimo Bontempelli, who first penned his realismo magico works in the 1920s. Like the writers who followed him, Bontempelli created rich, fantastic worlds that blended fable and precise description, dream and reality.

In Separations, published in English for the first time, the author presents two novels that are interlinked in subject and form, but vastly different in portrayal of mother and child relationships. The first, The Boy with Two Mothers, begins with a woman playfully sneaking up behind her young child and placing her hands over his eyes in a game of "guess who?", only to have the boy push her hands away before declaring that he's not her child at all. When he says he possesses a different mother, then produces the woman to prove it, the story turns into a nightmare for the woman who feels as if she's lost her child forever.

The second novel, The Life and Death of Adria and Her Children, contains a far less tender mother, who values her beauty over her children, and refuses to see them more than once a week, fearing that acknowledgement of them will cause her to lose her looks and therefore hasten her death. Bontempelli's prose style mirrors his fanciful tales as he turns even commonplace things like a child playing outside into a gauzy dream: "She looked up at the illuminated windows of the house. A wave of perfume rose from the earth. Tullia shook with chill and suddenly felt alone in the world…Teetering on tiptoe, she went down steps that circled a pile of stones through which a rushing stream of water was singing to the evening stars."

In each story, the themes of loss and yearning combine with a humorous irony, so that even background events of political upheaval seem distant and hazy. Bontempelli's richly imagined worlds, described as if he'd dreamed them just the night before, are beautifully haunting and fabulously written.

*Elizabeth Millard*