ForeWord Reviews

SHORT STORIES

The Beijing of Possibilities
Jonathan Tel
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Reality, wrote the American poet Wallace Stevens, “is things as they are.” That may be true in Western fiction, but what is really real in Beijing? The dozen stories that make up *The Beijing of Possibilities* carry realistic details of life in the capital of China all the way into surreality and back again. Take the author. Is it Jonathan Tel, who gets the cover credit, or Helan Xiao? Tel, the quantum physicist and an opera librettist who wrote the foreword? In the final story of this collection, “The Most Beautiful Woman in the World,” we get a hint that something odd is going on. Helan is hired by a Chinese-American named Tang to write the libretto for his opera. The story is to be based on the tale of Wang Jhaojun, a man sold to the Huns by the Chinese emperor. After Helan writes the libretto, Tang modernizes the story. Helan rewrites the libretto. The opera is canceled. Helan takes the money Tang paid her, retires from her teaching job, and starts writing stories about “barely fictionalized” life in Beijing. “To give herself courage, she pretends a foreign author had made up these storiesÉand she was translating him into Chinese.” So could it be that Helan is the real author of this collection?

Aside from questions of authorship, the stories create a world in which one has to wonder whats real in the worlds oldest civilization? Maybe in Beijing a singing messenger in a gorilla suit can be arrested, fingerprinted, mildly tortured, and released without anyone ever realizing that theres a man in the monkey suit. Maybe its possible for a clever village boy to make a fantastic Monkey King-like journey and come home with the cotton-candy machine for which he was sent out. Maybe a Ming princess receives a cell phone in a bowl of chrysanthemums, has long, too-intimate conversations with a twenty-first century ad writer, and ends up on his blog. Maybe traditional matchmaking techniques, including the matching of horoscopes, are used every day to connect ambitious young Chinese to shady capitalists around the world. Perhaps Chairman Mao still casts a long shadow over the land.

The stories in this book are hypnotic. Like opera and legend, theres no way to know how “realistic” or how anti-romantic they are, with their ironic endings. Perhaps it doesnt matter; the sheer pleasure of entering this world is enough.

Barbara Ardinger