

# THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

Review by Alexandra Shelley

## “DAYS OF AWE” A.M. HOMES

(VIKING, 2018)

“The first rule for a writer of fiction is it should not be made so strange as fact,” Thomas Hardy warned. A.M. Homes is a fiction writer who can be counted on to ignore that rule, her novels and stories outstripping the absurdity of life – usually. The alarming thing about reading her latest short story collection, *Days of Awe*, in 2018 is that life in America might be catching up to her vision.

As the “transgressive novelist” in the title story “*Days of Awe*” puts it, defending herself from an attack by the moderator at the genocide conference: “As for the question regarding an intention to shock, I have written nothing that didn’t first appear in the morning paper.”

In recent weeks as I read this grimly entertaining collection, I saw the news refracted through A.M. Homes’s funhouse mirror. I’ve been influenced by her vision since the mid ‘80s, when I was working at *The Star* and started a weekly fiction series. From the slush pile, I picked a powerful fable about a Procrustean therapist who uses his couch to either stretch out or cut down his patients, depending on what he thinks they need. I called the author to tell her we’d like to publish the story, tentatively suggesting that the ending wasn’t quite right.

A.M. asked affably what I thought she should do about it. As a recently minted English major, it hadn’t occurred to me to respond to a piece of fiction with anything but veneration, or perhaps a ruler to measure the iambic pentameter. But together we worked out a new ending, and in the 30 years since then as an editor and teacher of fiction writing, I’ve stretched out or lopped off pieces off many-a story.

In that time, A.M. Homes has come to epitomize one of our darkest surrealists, perhaps most strikingly in her novel *The End of Alice*, narrated mostly by a convicted pedophile and child murderer who corresponds from prison with a 19-year-old girl who describes seducing a 12-year-old boy.

*The Mistress’s Daughter*, Homes’ memoir about meeting her biological parents in her 30s, reveals that even her own life surpasses her imagination. Her “father” insisted on rendezvous in hotels and refused to introduce her to his other kids, as if she were his mistress (as her mother had been at age 17). Her “mother” demanded affection from the daughter she gave up for adoption at birth, and ultimately was hoping A.M. would donate a kidney to her.

When our daughters were young and I saw A.M. Homes at the Bleeker Street playground, that was jarring. And then I heard that she’d become a Girl Scout Troop leader – a troop that meets in Tribeca, but still. To conflate an author’s private life and her fictional products is unfair, demeaning to the imagination. No one would confuse Mary Shelley with Dr. Frankenstein. And yet Homes is so consistently surreal, that to see her sitting in an ordinary sand box – that just didn’t compute.

It’s a uniquely American combination of the wholesome and corrupt that she chronicles in *Days of Awe*, which is comprised of an exhilarating profusion of genres, including the epistolary style updated into four voices in a parakeet-owners chat room; a mermaid fairy tale as dark as a Grimm’s; a transcript of a therapy session.

Homes conjoins the mundane with the phantasmagorical in a way that makes you acknowledge how fine the line is between them. The story “*Days of Awe*” revolves around a genocide conference – two words that when paired throw both phenomena into a new light. At one point, the conference gets out of control when its participants square off against attendees at a gun show being held in the convention center across the street. The past comes to back

to life, reenactments run rampant, and you see that “genocide” cannot be contained in the orderly contemplation implied by “conference.”

Another of the recombinant stories is “The National Cage Bird Show”: An American soldier in Afghanistan, a school girl on the Upper East Side, and two unidentified bird owners meet in a parakeet chat room.... It sounds like the first line of a joke, but in the course of the story, there are graphic deaths and mutilations by IEDs; child molestation; and one of the budgies gives birth -- “smiley faces all around,” writes the bird’s owner. (Lives with two parakeets)

Like all good surrealists, Homes is slyly polemical. By pushing her depiction of daily life a few degrees further, she invites us to look at the normally unexamined forces at work, and even at linguistic contradictions that we no longer notice are oxymorons -- “extra-large minivan” or “fat-free half-and-half.”

Running throughout the collection are various manifestations of our national obsession with how we display ourselves. If beauty is only skin deep, it better be nicely burnished, tattooed, collagened. In an interview circulated by her publisher, Homes is asked about the role plastic surgery plays in several of the collection’s stories, and she allows that she’s interested in “the split between who we present ourselves as and who we are to ourselves.” For most of her characters, the former entirely eclipses the latter.

This is a book which begins with a Botox injection – just a prelude to a day at the beach in “Brother on Sunday,” a story featuring a plastic surgeon. Tom, the narrator, is preparing for an encounter with his brother, a dentist who “visits the beach once a year, like a tropical storm that changes everything.” While Tom’s wife is on the phone consoling a friend who suspects her husband’s having an affair, “He injects a little here, a little there.... Later, when someone says, ‘You look great,’ he’ll smile and his face will bend gently, but no lines will appear.”

“Brother on Sunday” bears some similarities to John Cheever’s “Goodbye, My Brother,” but though in both stories the beachside confrontation between the brothers does escalate, in Homes’s distilled version, the emotions that have fueled this conflict over the years can only be postulated via the numbness of the brothers. It’s Cheever on Botox.

This numbness afflicts many of the characters in this collection, stuck in corrosive marriages, toxic families, or their own imperfect bodies. The aimless young woman narrator in “Hello Everybody” confides to her best friend as they sit by her family’s pool in LA:

“I don’t mind feeling paralyzed. I think I’m used to it. In fact, I’m not even sure that what people would call paralyzed isn’t just normal for me. I don’t move a lot.”

“Unless you’re in spin class,” Walter says.

[From the morning paper: In a Science Friday radio show about eyebrows as communication devices, a professor reports that studies of people who have disabled their eyebrows via Botox show they not only lose the ability to convey messages using facial expressions, but also to actually feel empathy.]

“Hello Everybody” is set in an LA where the residents have tinkered with themselves to the point that they have no idea who they were originally; you can be arrested for public bulimia; the restaurants serve 10-calorie dishes; and nature has been so thoroughly manipulated that even the goldfinches can be trained to play dead in order to get poppy seed bagels.

The mother of the narrator, Cheryl, is temporarily blinded after having attempted to change the color of her eyes; the dog is recovering from surgery to remove unsightly fatty tumors; the father walks with a hand mirror held in front of him so he can stare at himself; and Cheryl’s older sister, Abigail, is a model:

“You should be an actress,” people used to tell Abigail. “You

should be yourself,” Cheryl says.  
“No idea how to do that,” Abigail confesses.

When we’re reunited with the family in the collection’s last story, “She Got Away,” they have met predictable ends, including the mother’s spa-induced coma. Abigail has married her plastic surgeon, Burton; is “so thin she actually looks flat”; and cannot smile or frown thanks to all the filler and Botox. When they visit their mother in the hospital, Abigail reports to her sister:

“Burton thinks Mom looks good, very relaxed.” Cheryl’s reply:  
“She’s unconscious.”

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If there are moments of sweetness in this sharply satirical collection, they are in the depictions of children, although these are some weird kids – brainwashed consumers, or warped by neglect.

There’s the lonely latch-key girl in the parakeet-owners chat room who is a “child of divorce, I live in a world without life, where even an ant crawling across a counter is cause for major intervention.” She’s driven to the dangers of the downstairs apartment by hunger (the housekeeper there makes good sandwiches, and her own mother doesn’t keep food around).

In “The Last Good Time,” there are legions of misplaced kids at Disneyland, according to a character who is an employee: “... that happens multiple times a day. We have a whole system set up to reunite lost children with their families.” But meanwhile the story’s narrator is a man who has fled his own baby girl and her mother, and it’s unclear if there is any system to effect this reunion.

And in “A Prize for Every Player,” there’s the baby apparently abandoned in the towels display at the Mammoth Mart, found by 7-year-old Tilda Sanford, who wants to keep it. Her father is uncertain: “Tom takes the baby... and gently turns it around, looking it over. ‘Doesn’t have a bar code. I don’t think it’s for sale.....’” (214)

[Back in “reality,” as depicted in her memoir: A.M.’s own adoption was clandestine. Working with an acquaintance rather than through an agency, her adoptive parents received word of her birth through a coded message: “Your package is here and it’s wrapped in pink ribbons.”]

It’s also the intersection of consumerism and electoral politics that “A Prize for Every Player” satirizes. Tom Sanford, mesmerized by the TV display at the Mammoth Mart, begins a screed about American politics of his youth vs. today (“I remember when politicians had a vision, a dream for the people of this country, and didn’t run their campaign based on a tax rebate if elected...”). It culminates in an endorsement of the big box store, “each one like an indoor small town, we spend our lives and our dollars in these places that we find comforting, satisfying.” He tells the story of a homeless family who lived in one such store for a year. The crowd grows around him, anoints him the people’s candidate for president.

“Do you believe in God?” someone calls out.

“Yes, I believe in God, and I believe in shopping to Friday sales flyers,” Tom says, and everyone laughs.

It’s in the ameliorating, realistic “everyone laughs” that Homes’s surrealist genius lies -- that and the next scene in which the presidential candidate is struggling to install a baby car seat (for the infant they’ve acquired). Anchoring her “sur” in this “realism”--the recognizable tasks, squabbles, small victories of daily life--Homes seduces readers into believing it all – God, coupons.

At a recent talk in a Brooklyn book store, Homes mentioned that this story – which has such resonance today – was written over eight years ago and grew out of asking herself “What would happen if an everyman ran for

office?” – well before the hypothetical came to pass.

[From the morning paper: A Walmart in Brownsville, Texas has been repurposed as an “unaccompanied alien children’s (UAC) shelter,” housing hundreds of migrant children separated from their parents by U.S. immigration officials. A U.S. Senator was denied access to the facility when he visited on June 3.]

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The collection’s title story addresses in a way Thomas Hardy’s warning to fiction writers about rendering real life believable. Fiction is represented by the narrator, the “transgressive novelist” who has written a book about the Holocaust and been invited to speak on a panel alongside a Holocaust survivor who challenges the novelist’s right to tell a story she herself hasn’t lived through. Gerda Hoff has written her own book, describing the slaughter of her family. When the novelist offers her a copy of her work, Gerda rejects it. “You know what I like? Chocolate ice cream. That’s something to live for.”

Nonfiction is represented by a war correspondent, an old acquaintance of the novelist’s, and though they wind up having sex, they also argue bitterly over who is a more convincing witness to atrocity. Argues the novelist: “The point of fiction is to create a world others can inhabit, to illuminate and tell a story that stirs empathy and compassion. And, asshole,” she adds, “fiction helps us to comprehend the incomprehensible.”

I like a book which contains its own review. *Days of Awe* does help readers comprehend the incomprehensible. But as for empathy, it’s difficult to feel for characters who are so barbed and defended, or else seem to have been pithed, their innards replaced by some sort of low-calorie foam and their exteriors plastic surgeryried into the American standard of flawlessness. Much of the dialogue consists of ripostes and retorts, or else reads like advertising jingles or purposely stilted theater-of-the-absurd exposition. If a character says “I love you” to her oldest friend, it’s modified by “you asshole.” When a husband cries, his wife’s response is: “Really?” (this in a story titled “Be Mine”).

By the end of *Days of Awe*, I interpreted the title differently: Awe as in the destruction of a “shock and awe” military campaign, because the damaged characters of these stories wouldn’t allow themselves to be vulnerable enough to feel awe, except maybe manufactured awe, as described by the narrator of “The Last Good Time” as he sits in his car atop the parking garage at Disneyland: “...the evening fireworks – Believe in Magic – Sleeping Beauty’s castle becomes a winter wonderland, the air is charged with awe and wonder, and in the end, as Christmas music plays, fake snow floats down.”

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