BENJAMIN LOWY: PHOTOGRAPHS FROM A RESURGENT RUSSIA

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50,000 LIFE COACHES CAN'T BE WRONG

Inside the Industry That's Making Therapy Obsolete

By Genevieve Smith

Adrian Nicole LeBlanc on Doug Stanhope

what's in the envelope—the committee was trading votes backstage until the very last minute.

Occasionally a surprise issues from an unexpected corner, as when Mr. Wo, the cheerful chairman of Shanghai Global Assets, Elysian's parent company, opens his mouth. "If an artist is good, nobody else can do what he or she does and therefore all comparisons are incoherent," the avant-garde Wo says.

> Only the mediocre, pushing forward a commonplace view of life in a commonplace language, can really be compared, but my wife thinks that "least mediocre of the mediocre" is a discouraging title for a prize.

Finding this funny requires holding a certain view of the kind of people who run companies with names like Shanghai Global Assets, but satire does usually depend, somewhat, on stereotype.

Lost for Words has special ire for "personal taste," that sacred cow of entertainment's consumer-driven content farms. But its one argument for what might pass as a standard (or at least expectation) for literature is undeniably personal. Vanessa, the much-maligned English professor, catches herself thinking about *King Lear* in reference to some ongoing family strife.

> And then she found herself wondering why any book should win this fucking prize she had become involved with unless it had a chance of doing what had just happened: coming back to a person when she wanted to cry but couldn't, or wanted to think but couldn't think clearly, or wanted to laugh but saw no reason to.

Not that she'll have her way in the end. The MP puts it like this:

> Vanessa had taken on the role of a doomed backbencher, making speeches to an empty chamber about values that simply had no place in the modern world. Frankly, he felt rather sorry for her.

The waning power of the novel is surely less related to "multiculturalism" and cultural studies, St. Aubyn's too-easy targets, than to technological change and television. But there is no need for pity. The happy few will muddle on, same as it ever was. Literature is one arena in which history is not written by the prizewinners.

Evie Wyld's second novel, **ALL THE BIRDS, SINGING** (Pantheon, $24.95, pantheonbooks.com), is the kind of prize bait Vanessa would love, with poetic sentences of sharp, precise descriptions, alternating chapters moving forward and backward in time, and a damaged narrator who finds something resembling emotional rescue. Wyld comes with a pedigree. Her first novel, *After the Fire, a Still Small Voice*, won two awards, and *Granta* named her one of their Best of Young British Novelists 2013. For better and worse this kind of ranking and credentialing is how (the few) readers of contemporary fiction choose what to buy, and Wyld, at least, is deserving of recognition. *All the Birds, Singing* is a serious book, and it takes itself seriously. It is self-consciously wrought and, like much prize fiction, has a curiously out-of-time quality that betrays no worries about the purpose or utility of novel-writing in the twenty-first century. Its backwoods setting complements its style of literary survivalism.

The story opens on Jake, a young Australian woman living as a sheep farmer on a rainy, lonely island far from home, stalked by birds and men. She's not doing any slaughtering, but members of her flock keep turning up dead.

> Another sheep, mangled and bled out, her innards not yet crusting and the vapors rising from her like a steamed pudding. Crows, their beaks shining, strutting and rasping, and when I waved my stick they flew to the trees and watched, flaring out their wings, singing, if you could call it that.

Jake has a hard time communicating with people, but she's intuitive with animals. She doesn't wear a back strap when she shears sheep, because she's learned how to hold them close and keep them calm so it's like "taking the skin off an orange."

The present-day plot is quiet and holds violence at arm's length while

"The Crow," by Carol E. Richards

the flashbacks are increasingly gruesome, delivering compounding traumas: prostitution, kidnapping, rape, arson. Someone loses his hand in a horrible shearing accident; many references are made to the scars on Jake's back, which aren't explained until the last dozen pages. It turns out Jake isn't quite the victim she's seemed, or at least she's a different kind of victim; the narrative aims for suspense, but the reveal, when it comes, feels overdue. The real pleasure in *All the Birds, Singing* is its brutal descriptions of the body (a swollen hand is likened to a "meat fist") and its gorgeously vivid landscapes—ripe material for a Jane Campion movie or miniseries.

At first Jake blames local teens for her sheep's deaths, though as time passes she comes to believe that there is an unknown animal on the land. Wyld never resolves the identity of the creature, nor does she give any indication what will happen to Jake, or to Lloyd, a stranger who has shown up with an offer of friendship. (The novel prefers evocation to explanation, and never even makes plain where Jake is living.) The last note is pretty but falsely profound, with the two holding hands—maybe predators or maybe prey—as "something crunched in the undergrowth."

Prizewinners like Evie Wyld can get book deals because publishing is kept afloat with celebrity memoirs, political biographies, and powerhouses like James Patterson, who employ armies of assistants to churn out formulaic bestsellers. Why is factory-foreman writing disparaged by cultural elites while factory art—by