

BOOKS

BOOK REVIEW

Smart, quirky writing can't sustain debut

Elif Batuman's novel has moments of beauty, but dull plot holds it back

By CHARLES FINCH
Chicago Tribune

Does anything have to happen in a novel for it to be good? The most fashionable novels of this decade—the gleefully watchful, products of the genre called autofiction, by Teju Cole, Ben Lerner, Rachel Cusk—seem to answer that question decisively in the negative. But the answer is yes; in their cases, it's merely that an author happens, rather than a narrative. Something significant is still going on.

Elif Batuman happens to us intermittently in her debut novel, "The Idiot." There are nice glimpses of beauty everywhere in it, the author's voice eccentric, funny, enormously intelligent. "Translucent minnows circled our ankles," she writes, standing in the shallows of a pond. "They were so alive. It was almost pure life in those little bodies, there was so little room for anything else." This is both one of those inimitable lines that the book goes to you love, and a description of how it feels to spot them.

But Batuman also attempts to make "The Idiot" the kind of novel that tells a story—sort of, anyway—the story of a young woman's first year at Harvard, and the story isn't good at all. The effect is half-rain-

sou, a skilled writer forcing herself into the contours of a weak book. It would be hard to regret reading it, harder still to read it a second time.

"The Idiot" is narrated by Selin, who seems to be Batuman's facsimile, America by birth and character but Turkish by parentage, dreamy, ambitious and inexperienced, an aspiring writer. (The author herself is now a staff writer at *The New Yorker*.) In the book's first half, she meets her roommates, decides on her classes, goes on a picnic with a friend who may be gay and keeps a vague eye on an upperclassman named Ivan.

Her wit and acuity just about keep this part of the book afloat, and at moments she captures so beautifully the feeling of being young and possibly in love, at the very least confused: "Soon," she writes of a Cambridge day, "the sleet turned to snow and became beautiful, and everything suddenly felt more important and meaningful."

But in the second half of the book, it falls apart. Selin goes to teach English in Hungary, and her account of it is interminable. I kept willing "The Idiot" to hurt forward a year, even a month, to offer a surprise. Instead it marches grimly on, as if in tribute to some



Author Elif Batuman's novel tells the story of a young woman's first year at Harvard.

forgotten army from the country where it's set. She's fallen hard for Ivan by now, and they exchange long, elliptical emails, but even he achieves no real particularity, given, instead, like most of the Hungarian characters, peculiarity, which is no substitute. In general, in fact, Batuman has no gift whatsoever for character; at least not one that's evident here, the Svetlanas and Bills and Ferns as blurry in their outlines as your own freshman-year acquaintances probably are to you.

But isn't that just the narcissism of the young? Why does Lerner's year abroad in "Leaving the

Atocha Station" work, but not his own? Batuman tries to inoculate herself against the book's boring bits, in its title, in emphasizing the meaninglessness of experiences that felt profoundly meaningful in the moment. Still, she is writing something like a traditional college novel she's tied to sentences like "winter drew to a close" and "summer was in the air" or a subplot where she wins a fiction prize, to her egregiously indistinct friends. Lerner's radicalism was in his abandonment of that machinery. Batuman finds herself trapped between mocking her autobiography and cherishing it.

It's the same problem that besets, for instance, Caleb Crain's lovely but tedious "Necessary Errors." The modern genealogy of novels like this one begins, ironically, with a book that's utterly ruthless toward itself: Flaubert's "Sentimental Education," about a young man whose youth seems vitally important to him yet adds up to almost nothing at all. "The Idiot" will itself toward that conclusion without believing it. Instead the past looks like her beautiful image of Cambridge at night from high up in a form, the lights of the cars and skulls below "like a galaxy."

THE IDIOT

ELIF BATUMAN

"The Idiot"

By Elif Batuman, Penguin, 432 pages, \$27

"The Idiot," from its title onward, tracks Batuman's obsession with Russian novelists, so maybe it's worth quoting Nabokov, who, referring to his own early book "Invitation of a Small Guest-Party," dismissively cites "the beginner's well-known propensity for obtruding upon his own privacy" and then, most tellingly, recalls "the relief of getting rid of oneself, before going on to better things."

The relief of getting rid of oneself. Batuman's acknowledgments indicate that she has worked on "The Idiot" off and on for much of this century. That's a very long time. Now that she's finished it, will be so interesting to see that she chooses to write next. In the meanwhile there's this honorably obscure, its unforgettable splices of truth embedded in a wretched plot. The book's clearest lesson is that we have to make our own mistakes—that youth, as Frost so devastatingly observed, is a journey nobody can take for us, an effort nobody can spare us. Perhaps the same is true for some writers.

Charles Finch is a freelance writer whose most recent novel is "The Inheritance."

BOOK REVIEW

After losing son, Ariel Levy's beautiful hunt for meaning

By HEIDI STEVENS
Chicago Tribune

It's an act of courage to hunt for meaning within grief, particularly if the search upends your life and shakes out the contents for all the world to sift through.

Ariel Levy embarks on the hunt beautifully in her new memoir, "The Rules Do Not Apply," which builds upon "Thanksgiving in Mongolia," the New Yorker essay for which she received the 2014 National Magazine Award for Essays and Criticism.

"Thanksgiving in Mongolia" is about the death of Levy's infant son. She gave birth at 19 weeks, and the baby died within minutes.

"The Rules Do Not Apply" is the story of what comes before and after his death. "Grief is a world you walk through skinned, unshelled," she writes. "What comes before is the stuff of early adulthood—love, heartbreak, marriage, career—albeit told through the lens of someone who weaves narratives for a living and for whom 'career' means, for example, traveling to rural South Africa to track down Castor Semanya, a female Olympic runner whose gender has been questioned around the world.

Levy works as a contributing editor at *The New Yorker* magazine for 12 years. In 2008 she hired as a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, David Rennick, the storied New Yorker editor, sends Levy a bouquet of flowers to welcome her aboard and signs it, "As ever, David Rennick."

"Are you sure it doesn't say 'Hi'?" Levy's wife, Lucy, jokes.

"Nowhere to go but down," her father tells her. It's a dream gig, and Levy relishes it, telling stories from all over the



"The Rules Do Not Apply"

By Ariel Levy, Random House, 224 pages, \$27

globe and profiling the likes of Nora Ephron and Margaret Dowd.

In her mid-30s, she's ready to become a mother. "Fertility meant nothing to us in our 20s; it was something to be secured in the dungeon and left there to molden," she writes. "In our early 30s, we remembered it existed and wondered if we should check on it, and then abruptly, horrifyingly it became urgent: Somebody find that dragon! It was time to raise it, get it ready for action."

"But the bear had not grown stronger during the decades of hibernation. By the time we tried to wake it, the dragon was weakened, wizened. Old."

Suddenly whatever time she and her friends spent not getting pregnant in their 20s and 30s seems utterly squandered, Levy writes.

At 38, she gets pregnant, but that pregnancy ends abruptly and tragically, when she's in Mongolia on a New Yorker assignment.

Her grief is all-encompassing and leaves her

unmoored, searching for answers—both medical (what went wrong?) and metaphysical. At a friend's 40th birthday party, a guest, upon learning that Levy is that friend, tells her, "Everything happens for a reason." It's a terrible thing to say—the sort of sentence that brushes away a person's grief as part of a larger, divine plan.

"The Rules Do Not Apply" is a search for meaning, not reason. It doesn't seek an explanation (outside of the medical one) for the death of Levy's son, any more than it seeks to explain away the love, fear, frustration and other experiences and emotions that take place within her life. Her grief becomes a new part of her—something to understand and get used to.

Levy seems bewildered at the weight of her grief, and the notion that she, like many of us, knew a life without it, when book deals and new coaches seemed like life's big deals. "When I was young," she writes, "When I had no idea that all over the city, all over the world, there were people walking around sealed in their own universes of loss, independent solar systems of suffering closed off from the regular world, where time and space and language is all you need to tell the truth."

She's brave and generous to share her story, which manages to be beautiful, even as it's stark and wrenching.

"The 10 or 20 minutes I was somebody's mother were black magic," Levy writes. "There is nothing I would trade them for. There is no place I would rather have seen." I'm grateful she takes us there too.

Heidi Stevens is a freelance writer.

Sports books roundup

By ED SHERMAN
Chicago Tribune



"Game Worn" by Stephen Wong and Dave Groh

Simon & Schuster, 320 pages, \$34.95

Nothing traces the history of sports better than the uniform. This coffee-table book features game-worn uniforms of the biggest stars ever to play the game. Baseball historian John Thorn writes in the introduction: "For generations, hallplayers' identities have been inextricably tied to their uniforms... An entire season's worth of wear, of blood, sweat and tears, shows up on a game-worn uniform, imbuing its fabric with unique personal history." Indeed, it is intoxicating to see the jersey Jackie Robinson wore during the 1952 season.

There is Babe Ruth's road jersey from 1920, his first year with the Yankees, and Sandy Koufax's with the 1966 Dodgers, his last season before retiring at 30. Frank Chance, the last manager to guide the Cubs to the World Series title before Joe Maddon, is represented with his home uniform from 1909-10. Also featured is "Mr. Cub" Ernie Banks' jersey from 1957.

The book details the stories of the great players who wore these uniforms. But the real fun is seeing the evolution of these uniforms, from the heavy flannel of the 1920s to the modern, sleeker, more colorful in the early days, to the bold, if not garish styles of the 1970s and '80s. Ultimately, baseball returned to its roots somewhat with more traditional jerseys in today's game, albeit with much better fabric.

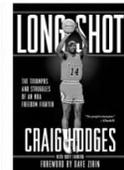


"Furious George" by George Karl

George Karl with Curt Sampson, Harper, 256 pages, \$27.95

Unlike most people in his position, George Karl was known for being extremely candid as a coach. So as the title suggests—"Furious George: My 30 Years Surviving NBA Divas, Clueless GMs, and Poor Shot Selection"—Karl doesn't hold back in his autobiography. The coach with 175 career victories (the fourth best in league history) delivers a lively, frank account of what it is like to guide an NBA team. The biggest challenge, he writes, is trying to get players who are making millions to actually put forth the effort to win. Karl writes:

"There's always trouble when I have a player whose commitment is to his numbers or his money or his brand—and not to the team." Karl really takes the torch to Carmelo Anthony, the superstar he coached for six years in Denver. He said Anthony is "the best offensive player he ever coached." But he also "was a user of people, addicted to the spotlight, and very unhappy when he had to share it." Terrific stuff. Also, Karl details how when he was coach of Seattle in 1994, the Bulls were set to trade Scottie Pippen for a package that included Shawn Kemp. At the last minute, Seattle got involved. Hodges expressed his concerns for the country. Hodges said he always lobbied for Jordan to use his status more to press for change. He even went public with his concerns. NBA Finals with criticism of Jordan's reluctance to get involved. Hodges understands those comments were part of the reason Pippen for the Bulls cut him shortly thereafter. Despite being only 31, he never played another game.



"Long Shot" by Craig Hodges

Craig Hodges with Kurt Smead, Harper, 220 pages, \$22.95

Craig Hodges always saw basketball as a vehicle to make an impact of the court. "Long Shot: The Triumph and Struggles of an NBA Freedom Fighter," the former Bulls player's autobiography co-written by Kurt Smead, documents the many facets of what was an interesting, and at times controversial, career. Hodges was a 2-point specialist on the Bulls' first two championship teams in 1991 and 1992. He provides behind-the-scenes insights into what it was like to play with Michael Jordan. Hodges, though, thought he had a higher duty than to just play basketball. He was often outspoken on social issues. When the Bulls visited the White House after winning their first title, Hodges famously wore a dashiki and handed a letter to President George H.W. Bush expressing his concerns for the country. Hodges said he always lobbied for Jordan to use his status more to press for change. He even went public with his concerns. NBA Finals with criticism of Jordan's reluctance to get involved. Hodges understands those comments were part of the reason Pippen for the Bulls cut him shortly thereafter. Despite being only 31, he never played another game.

Ed Sherman is a freelance writer.