

A guardian angel is a liar with wings

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Tim Martin reviews two short stories collections: Etgar Keret and Aamer Hussein

Dedicated writers of literary short stories are rare, and getting rarer. So are good ones. It's understandable: the grim unlikelihood of remuneration for such collections in today's publishing market, combined with the unforgiving nature of the short form, must make the necessary apprenticeship look pretty forbidding.

So here is a welcome surprise: two collections that splendidly articulate the virtues of the discipline and demand continued support for what V S Pritchett, an adept himself, thought was "the glancing form of fiction that seems to be right for the nervousness and restlessness of contemporary life".

The Israeli writer Etgar Keret's dark little fictions never run for more than 10 pages. A boy develops a protective friendship with a porcelain piggy-bank called Margolis, until the day his father arrives bearing a hammer and an expectant look. The Greek goddess Venus turns up in an office to do the photocopying: she's "perfect. And pretty nice, too. But that's it."

A guy pushes his guardian angel off a rooftop, only to discover from the twitching body that it was nothing but "a liar with wings". One magician becomes traumatised by his inability to produce from his hat anything but mutilated rabbits and dead babies; another graduates with honours from Magician High School but his girlfriend leaves him because he can't abracadabra back an amputee's legs.

Keret's surreal conceits are couched in a wry, downbeat language that's a long way from the winsome posturing with which his young American counterparts usually tackle the fantastic. The effect is something like a sorrowful hybrid of Kafka and Donald Barthelme: deadpan on the surface, with a bassnote of discomfort and emotional alienation that makes even the briefest tales snag in the mind.

Most of the characters (mostly guys) have a suspicious inability to be surprised and a distressing affinity with violence - something that accounts both for the skewed humour of the prose and, perhaps, for its relevance in contemporary Israel, where Keret's books are on the school syllabus and where his views are debated in the Knesset.

This isn't writing about politics, but it does have a politicised background: most of its protagonists are casualties of military service and a military society, people whose values - about death, sex, laughter, society, equality - have been transformed. Each piece is at once universal and particular, and you sense that a good deal of localised pressure has gone into the shaping of these world-class gems. The translation is brilliant, too.

Aamer Hussein's stories come from a very different sphere, one that initially seems vaguely old-fashioned to a reader accustomed to the razzle-dazzle of much contemporary fiction. The

narratives in *Insomnia* are cool, clean-lined and realist; their protagonists and their friends are academics, writers and poets, who by and large do the things that academics, writers and poets do.

But Hussein's limpid style is very successful at evoking the cultural and social dislocation in each of his inward characters, whether it's a Pakistani student in London, in love with his mercurial and savage Japanese companion; a deracinated London intellectual translating the poetry of the university friend who cuckolded him; or an expatriate writer trying to string together a poem on happiness after the earthquake in Pakistan.

These stories aren't concerned so much with event as with subtle gradations of feeling, vague betrayals of memory, odd details that magnify as an image for something larger. "You can spin stories out of your emptiness, but writing your images away can also leave you drained and empty," muses the narrator of the title story, and as a diffracted poetic record of how creativity works on creators this collection is hauntingly convincing.

Certain sections can seem a touch overcooked, but there's some great, subtle work here, and the sense of abstracted longing that Hussein generates will accompany the reader for some time after the book ends.