

Holding fast

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Siri Hustvedt

MEMORIES OF THE FUTURE

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To write a book is for all the world like humming a song or whistling a tune or striding down the street”, the narrator of *Memories of the Future* proclaims towards the end. A male voice interrupts, asking her to stick to the facts: “Get a hold of yourself and tell it just the way it happened”. This is “the voice of authority” – and the narrator resists it. She replies that she will do her best but that it’s tricky because the stories in the book aren’t over.

This dialogue is typical of Siri Hustvedt’s new novel: playful but punchy, insisting at once on the right of the female writer to claim a different authority from that of her male counterparts, and on her freedom to combine the male and female within her own head. In this novel Hustvedt is drawing overtly on *Tristram Shandy* for a model of capaciousness that allows stories to proliferate. Unlike in Laurence Sterne’s novel, the narrator here is an explicit alter ego for Hustvedt, sharing her background in Minnesota, her initials and her intellectual preoccupations. This is a work of autofiction that uses the capacity of the autofictional both to reveal the layers of construction within the apparent realities of selfhood and to reground fiction in the real.

The novel opens in 2016 with the sixty-one-year-old S.H. moving her mother into care. Among her boxes, she finds an old journal, creased in one corner. Greeting it like “a beloved relative I had given up for dead”, she begins to read, and the notebook’s account of S.H. moving to New York in 1978, aged twenty-three, becomes one thread in the book. S.H. juxtaposes this thread with the comic detective novel she was writing in 1978 and musings from her older self, by turns protective, rueful, angry and amused. All of this is interspersed with Shandean line drawings by Hustvedt herself – wry portraits of Albert Einstein or Donald Trump (“we live in Wonderland now”, the narrator observes of her present political moment).

Along the way, a large cast of characters amasses, some real and some imagined. In New York, S.H. (or Minnesota, as she’s quickly nicknamed) meets a group of four friends, and the affectionate portrait of young people forging lives and personalities in solidarity with each other is movingly done. She also gets to know Lucy Brite, her neighbour in the dilapidated, thin-walled apartment block she is romantically delighted to call home. Schooled on gothic literature, Minnesota eavesdrops on her neighbour and pieces together the story of her tragic past, learning that Lucy’s daughter fell to her death from a window. She gets to know Lucy, whose membership of a witches’ coven gives Hust-



vedt an opportunity to engage with the occult (a topic of interest to various current feminist writers; see, for example, *Spells: 21st-century occult poetry*, 2018, edited by Sarah Shin and Rebecca Tamás).

Inside her apartment, Minnesota reads Emily Dickinson aloud and brings her characters into being: a pair of adolescents aspiring to the part of Sherlock Holmes (another S.H.) but confronted only with a disappearing father. The sexagenarian S.H. sees this professorial figure as a version of her own father, a doctor prone to black, absent moods. Alongside these fictional characters, there are some guest appearances from real people who are experienced as less real than the fictional ones: Minnesota hears John Ashbery give a disappointing reading and comes across Norman Mailer in a bar, backslapping, chortling and talking to a tall man about “the wives”. More real, perhaps most real of all, is Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who serves as an inspiration and alter ego for the young S.H. The Baroness was a poet, artist and collaborator of Marcel Duchamp, the probable creator of his urinal, described here as an “artist as proto-punk, fuck-you riot, who ... wrote poems like howls or burns that came from deep in the diaphragm”.

Throughout, philosophical musings combine with the amusing, often rather picaresque action of the 1970s narrative (in its more ribald strain, the book engages seriously with the friskiness and sensuousness of the eighteenth-century world it invokes in Sterne). The diary sections are written with compelling energy, and bring the young woman easily to life, with her enticing combination of strength and weakness. Hungry, Minnesota eats food from dustbins; sexually frustrated, she masturbates, “hitting the foam” to fantasies of male and female lovers on trains. Across the three narratives, themes emerge – themes that have preoccupied Hustvedt throughout her career: memory, time, and sex and gender.

The men Minnesota encounters are consistently disappointing, and seen through the eyes of the older S.H. they become a source of growing anger. The book’s centre-piece is a disturbing, powerfully written scene of assault, conducted by a young man who resonates presciently with the young Brett Kavanaugh as described by Christine Blasey-Ford just after Hustvedt’s book was finished. Jeff, an Ivy League sportsman, takes Minnesota to a party where he brags

with friends about “sexual exploits due to him as a member of the team”; then, when Minnesota tries to leave on her own, he informs her that “a girl who comes with me leaves with me”. Out of a mixture of politeness and physical weakness, she allows him into her flat where he tries to rape her, deterred only by Lucy shouting from next door.

In the forty years since, S.H. has wondered why her protest didn’t count: “why he seemed to be a character in another story, and why his story smothered mine”. Writing at a time when this behaviour is finally being called out (the book ends in 2017, just before the #MeToo movement really took off), she understands that she became “his creature” that night, infected by his “derision and disgust” and therefore blamed herself for his crime.

Jeff’s behaviour allows S.H. to see a pattern in other, smaller moments of male derision or control. There’s Lucy Brite’s husband, who has a habit of locking up his wife’s possessions; the boy at school who recoils when S.H. tries to make the first move. Perhaps most hurtfully, there’s S.H.’s father, informing her when she reveals her knowledge of the human skeleton that she will one day “make a fine nurse”. It is a source of great satisfaction to the older S.H., as well as to the reader, when Minnesota explodes at a dinner party after an older man informs her that she won’t have anything to add to the debate. There follows a satisfyingly brilliant speech, demolishing his arguments as “hogwash” and quoting Wittgenstein in German. She then, somewhat comically, faints, overwhelmed by this first success in answering back to an authoritative man.

It is this battle between the sexes that gives the book its bite, alongside its more whimsical and gothic elements. *Memories of the Future* is difficult to categorize. It’s a playful, thoughtful book about the workings of memory and the relationship between our older and younger selves. It’s a paean to the pleasures of reading, celebrating the ways that a lifetime with books enhances and complicates selfhood. It’s a work of autofiction that offers truthful fiction to counter an era of fake news. But it is most formidable as a novelistic take on the past fifty years of feminism, told through its parallel snapshots of 1978 and 2016. In this respect we can see it as a kind of successor to Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* (1962), another book invested in testing and extending the novel form. The dual time frame allows us to see an intelligent woman both at the moment of becoming a feminist and following a lifetime as one. After Minnesota’s philosophical outburst, Lucy’s friend (a fellow witch) tells her not to fear her anger: “remember this: the world loves powerful men and hates powerful women ... the world will punish you, but you must hold fast”. The older S.H. has held fast. She knows, as she informs her male interlocutor, that the stories told here aren’t over. They may never be over, and we are lucky to have novelists like Siri Hustvedt to help us to complicate and understand them.