

REMARKABLE COINCIDENCES AND DÉJÀ VU

***Happenstance. Tales of Circumstance*, Lillian Sciberras, Horizons, ISBN 978-99957-38-13-6, 2012, 70 pages.**

Remarkable coincidences feature prominently in this slim volume of short stories and essays by established Maltese author, Lillian Sciberras, also well known for her published verse. These coincidences suggest the presence of irrational forces at play, even though, as with any complex work, there are always alternative plausible explanations for the reader to consider.

One of the most intriguing pieces is ‘Through a Glass Darkly’ in which the narrator describes her habit of peering through one particular window, her eyes fixed on an elderly person intensely at work in his studio. After a hiatus of a few weeks (so we are told), the narrator returned to the scene with a premonition of something strange likely to unfold before her eyes. Her worst fears were confirmed when she discovered that the building was no longer there and a café stood in its place. She was told that the café had been there for quite some time.

This is the sort of perplexing account that can lead to a variety of explanations. Is this a manifestation of the para-psychological in our lives? Do people often fail to distinguish between fact and fiction? As we grow older, do we recall experiences

and relive sensations of a quarter of a century ago as though they occurred much more recently?

Then there is the equally intriguing piece in which the narrator recalls a set of coincidences that occurred during a trip to Budapest. She relates an experience she had when travelling on a 'hop-on hop-off' tourist bus. She was captivated by a young girl on the bus who appeared very familiar to her. The possibility of reincarnation emerges strongly in this account. And yet there can always be some plausible alternative explanation which the powerful feeling of familiarity with the child would make the narrator reluctant to accept.

Other themes broached by Sciberras include Death, a key theme among those who have experienced the loss of numerous close relatives and friends, especially over a short, concentrated period of time. The narrator's father beseeches the "tall and gaunt" Death Lady (the biblical Angel of Death?) to stay away from his family; she had visited the family one time too many in the past. This time, though, the Lady allows the family some respite or possibly a stay of execution given the sobering reminder that no one is immune to her presence - she opted to visit a neighbour instead.

I first became acquainted with the author through her involvement in radical politics in the seventies. The theme of individual/collective revolutionary

judgement and constituted authority comes to mind in these contexts. The theme emerges strongly in the volume's very first story. This is Celina's story set during the period of revolutionary France when Malta was still ensnared in a 'medievalist' political time warp. Celina's unorthodox approach to life, her non-conformity and intellectual curiosity, which led her to venture into territories that few, if any, other Maltese persons dared approach, proved her undoing. She was burnt as a witch in a manner that recalls bygone Salem, Massachusetts, as recounted by such literary figures as Nathaniel Hawthorne and much more recently Arthur Miller.

The tale of the ordinary man provides us with the flip-side to this tragic view of the clash between individual judgement and constituted authority. Here we come across a man who is deluded by the 'consumer culture ideology' in which he is immersed. He is the conformist *par excellence* who misconstrues strictures (regarding the kitsch in which he has invested) as compliments and who treats everything as a possession. He lives a life of 'having' rather than 'being,' not realising that those he claims to possess resist this possession in various ways. His wife promptly married someone else on his death, making the reader suspect that she might have been cuckolding him all along.

Lillian Sciberras comes across, to me at least, as a former radical activist who mellowed over the years, perhaps disenchanted by mainstream politics. It is this sense of disenchantment that seems to underlie 'The Minister's Wife,' a piece I

recall having read when it first appeared in the short-lived magazine *Tomorrow* in the early eighties and which remained etched in my memory.

In 'The Substitute,' the author takes the issue of renegeing on one's professional responsibilities, regarding vulnerable groups, to its violent extreme. In my view, more could have been made of the opening setting in which a medieval monastery is said to have stood on the site where the mental asylum, the context for this story, was erected. This would have accorded the story, with its gruesome ending, an atavistic dimension.

In 'The Audition,' we come across the power of people to captivate others with their riveting look and ability to spin a tale— surely the mark of a good actor or actress. Throughout 'White noise,' the dramatic in everyday life is revealed in snippets, each foregrounding rich and colourful characters that can provide the raw material for dramatic representations.

In a non fictional piece, the older readers are taken down memory lane. We have an evocative account of the way the author 'broke into the movies' in the '50s. She recalls the experiences of watching films in cinemas that were landmarks along the route from the Sliema Ferries to Ghar id-Dud, some surviving into the eighties. But then we also have a story which captures the chilling coincidence of a friend's passing away around the same time that a TV set switches channels

automatically – changes in location at different levels but more or less occurring simultaneously and [dare I say, in this day and age?] in ‘real time.’

Sciberras’ writing is lucid and vigorous. One piece is deceptively pleasant for the most part. We feel as though we are ‘sauntering’ through the narrative before being abruptly jolted by an unexpected ending. The story, narrated through the eyes of a cat, conveys a sense of playful innocence. It however ends in a manner which cat lovers like me would not dare contemplate, even though the tragedy is alas an all too familiar and painful one.

Peter Mayo

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