

POSTCARDS

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

Department of English Literature and Linguistics

Bar-Ilan University

Judith Colp Rubin

310034152

Adviser: Evan Fallenberg

25/10/2015

גלויות

הצעה לתזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לבלשנות וספרות אנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר אילן

גיודית קולפ רובין

310034152

מנחה: אבן פלנברג

25/10/2015

Table of Contents

Aims and General Description.....3

Conceptual Background.....3

Shape of Project.....6

Bibliography..... 8

Aims and General Description

Postcards will be a collection of short stories about women and travel. Each story focuses around a woman either living, travelling or working in her non-native country. The women will range in age, personal status and nationality and the reason why they are abroad. A tour guide in Israel, an immigrant from the Ukraine, takes a wealthy American Jewish family on a tour of Israel. A veteran U.S. diplomat now posted in Vilnius, Lithuania, receives a letter from a local woman purporting to be her husband's mistress. In Lake Atitlan, Guatemala, an American woman brokers a family reconciliation with the son who absconded with family money and fled America.

The stories in *Postcards* will constitute a trip not only to different countries, but also to different literary formats. Most of the stories will be written in a straightforward narrative with a first or second point of view. In other stories, I want to use a different narrative style--perhaps the sole use of letters or emails. I will consider having a story set in a completely different century, either from the past or the future or to use a different point of view.

Conceptual Background

The stories in *Postcards* will deal with the different reasons for why we travel. There are the voyages immigrants take to improve their living conditions or to follow relatives such as spouses and parents. There are the voyages taken for professional reasons, such as the diplomatic corps. Then there are the voyages of enjoyment which, as Alain De Botton writes in *The Art of Travel*, “express, however inarticulately, an understanding of what life might be about, outside of the constraints of work and struggle for survival.”

Themes explored in *Postcards* will include independence, freedom and acculturation. Whether one is travelling for vacation, work or in search of a better life as an immigrant, travelers tend to feel less restrained than they do at home. They are no longer bound by the familiar or the past. This concept is especially relevant to the lives of women who are usually more prone more than men to societal and personal constraints. This loosening up can be exhilarating, but also overwhelming and even dangerous; sometimes it is even illusory. Another major theme in *Postcards* is the opposite of travel – home. Travel reminds us that we are most shaped by where we came from.

I was one of those lucky individuals who had the opportunity as a child to travel abroad extensively. By my early 20s, I had seen most of Europe, including the former Soviet Union, and several countries in Asia. I continued travelling throughout college, climbing on and off overnight trains, hitchhiking, bedding down in youth hostels and hooking up with strangers. These trips were often filled with loneliness and dangerous circumstances, but through them I learned about myself. Then at age 30, I made *aliyah* and experienced the challenges of immigrant life.

My greatest literary influence in conceiving this collection has been travel literature, that genre which straddles the line between fiction and non-fiction. One of the best of this genre is Paul Theroux, whose many travel books made me understand that when touring a country a big part of the experience is getting there, not just reaching the destination itself. Theroux also introduced to me the concept of making sweeping and even politically incorrect statements characterizing people and places. For example, in his first full-length book, *The Great Railway Bazaar* -- Theroux's four-month journey by train from London through Europe, the Middle East, India and Southeast Asia -- he flippantly writes there is nothing worth seeing in Afghanistan.

I am eager to read and reacquaint myself with other esteemed travel writers such as Pico Iyers, William Least Heat Moon and the many editions of the *Best Travel Writing* for guidance in describing foreign setting, local personalities and generating story ideas.

A recent reading of Alain De Botton's *The Art of Travel* inspired me to consider the philosophy of travel. These are themes which I wish to develop in *Postcards*. This includes the contrast between our preconceptions of a place with the reality, the extent to which art shapes our appreciation of a place and how our internal world always shapes our external world. Finally, I am intrigued by De Botton's observation that it is through travel, not staying at home, that our real self emerges.

I have learned about the freedom which women especially experience travelling from Elizabeth Gilbert (*Eat, Pray, Love*), Mary Morris (*Nothing to Declare*) and the annual editions of the *Best Women's Travel Writing*. All of these works describe the joys and perils of gusty women of all ages travelling solo.

For information about the life of diplomats, which will form the basis of at least one of the stories in *Postcards*, I will turn to several recent works including *Career Diplomacy*,

America's Other Army and the *Realities of Foreign Service Life*. There are many excellent articles on this subject in newspapers and personal blogs including "Being a Foreign Service Officer Became Much, Much Harder after 9/11, and "Love, Romance, Sex in the U.S. Foreign Service."

In fiction, there has been a vast modern literature about female immigrants. In this category I have been influenced by Jhumpa Lahiri, notably her short story collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies*. My story, *The Brownsteins Visit Israel*, will be an homage to Lahiri's story that gives her collection its title. Both stories contrast the gap between individuals from the same ethnic group living in the diaspora as compared to the land of origin. Similarly, I am inspired by Chimamanda Adichie (*The Thing Around Your Neck* and *Americanah*) who depicts, with vivid selective illustrations, Nigerian women both as pampered brats and victims in a sexist society and in acculturating abroad. From Adichie I can also learn about how to write dialogue to reflect someone's cultural background.

From Caitlin Horrocks (*You are Not from Here*) I have learned the frightening aspects of being a woman abroad, both as the member of a minority group in a country and as a traveler picking an unknown sexual partner. Ben Fountain (*Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*), taught me there are no sacred subjects in literature, even death.

Of course, no fictitious work about travel can fail to examine some of the classics. At the top of this list is *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, which helped set the standard for all travel books and indeed literature itself. This epic shows both the allure and sacrifices of travel. Other classics which I am eager to read include John Steinbeck (*Travels with Charly*), Somerset Maugham's stories set abroad and Paul

Bowles (*The Sheltering Sky*). From Agatha Christie (*Murder on the Orient Express*) I expect to learn how to write a piece taking place on a train.

I have chosen to do a short story collection primarily because I feel the subject of travel, with its emphasis on diversity and change, lends itself naturally to this genre. I feel one of the biggest challenges I will face as a writer with this collection will be to incorporate the setting with the plot. I want the reader to feel that with each story they have travelled to a different country, not only because of the change in scenery, but also because of the personal conflict described. In other words, setting and plot should affect one another.

Shape of Project

Postcards will consist of approximately six to eight stories ranging in length from 2,500 to 5,000 words.

The stories will be organized, very roughly, according to the different stages one experiences travelling or living abroad. The first stage is that of high expectations. This is based on a preconception one has of the trip. In the second stage one experiences rage or frustration as the preconception clashes with reality. One experiences annoyance with the foreign surroundings and a yearning for the familiarity of home. Finally, the last stage of acceptance of being abroad, even if it is an alienating experience.

The following is a tentative list of stories:

- 1) "The Brownsteins Visit Israel" – A Russian-Israeli tour guide takes around a wealthy American Jewish family
- 2) "The Crossing" – A divorced American woman meets an impressive young Albanian man on the night train from Rome to Sicily.
- 3) "A Diplomatic Affair" – A veteran American diplomat receives a letter from a woman purporting to be her husband's mistress.
- 4) "Reunion" – A spinster convinces her father to travel to Guatemala for a reunion with the brother who absconded with money from the family business.
- 5) "Overboard"-- A cynical and burnt-out novelist teaches a writing course to a group of American women on a Turkish sailboat.

Overall, I would like the entire voyage of reading *Postcards* make one consider how travel both change us and makes us learn about ourselves.

Bibliography

- Adichie, Chimamanda. *Americanah*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.
- Adichie, Chimamanda. *The Thing Around your Neck*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009
- Antopol, Molly. *The UnAmericans: Stories*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2014.
- Best Travel Writing*. San Francisco: Travelers' Tales. 2000-2015.
- Best Women's Travel Writing*. San Francisco: Travelers Tales, 2005-2015.
- Bruno, James. "Love, Romance, Sex in the U.S. Foreign Service." Personal Blog, January 5, 2011.
- Christie, Agatha. *Murder on the Orient Express*. New York: Harper, 2011.
- De Botton, Alain. *The Art of Travel*. New York: Vintage, 2002.
- Dorman, Shawn. *Inside a U.S. Embassy*. Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2009.
- Fountain, Ben. *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*. New York: Harper Collins, 2009.
- Gilbert, Elizabeth. *Eat, Pray, Love*. New York: Penguin, 2006.
- Homer. *The Iliad and the Odyssey*. New York: Penguin, 1998.
- Horrocks, Caitlin. *This is Not Your City*. Louisville: Sarabande, 2011.
- Iyer, Pico. *Sun After Dark*. New York: Vintage, 2005.
- Khazan, Olga. "Being a Foreign Service Officer Became Much, Much Harder after 9/11." *The Atlantic*, April 9, 2013.
- Kopp, Harry and Charles Gillespie, editors. *Career Diplomacy*. Washington D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2011.
- Kraleiv, Nicholas. *America's Other Army*. CreateSpace, 2009.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Interpreter of Maladies*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000.
- Lehrer, Jonah. "Why We Travel." *The Guardian*, March 14, 2010
- Li, Yiyun. *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*. New York: Random House, 2006.

- Linderman, Patricia and Melissa Brayer-Hess, editors. *Realities of Foreign Service Life*,
Volumes 1 and 2. Bloomington: iUniverse, 2007
- Maugham, Somerset. *Rain and Other South Sea Stories*. Dover: Dover, 2005. (Print).
- Maugham, Somerset. *Collected Short Stories*, London: Penguin, 1992. (Print).
- Moon, William Least Heat. *Blue Highways*. New York: Sagebrush, 1991. (Print).
- Morris, Mary. *Nothing to Declare*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1988. (Print).
- Oria, Shelly. *New York 1, Tel Aviv 0*. New York: Farrar Strauss, 2014.
- Steinbeck, John. *Travels with Charly*. New York: Penguin, 2012.
- Theroux, Paul. *The Great Railway Bazaar*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006.
- Theroux, Paul. *The Tao of Travel*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011.
- Thomas, Maria, *Come to Africa and Save Your Marriage*. New York: Soho, 2007.
- Tranum, Sam, editor. *Love on the Road*. New York: Malinki, 2013.