

the narrator's self-portrait of an adventurous time in his life, an enlightened vision of a life previously un-lived. *Killing Commendatore* is another wonderfully elaborate Murakami concoction.

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Lavie Tidhar
Unholy Land

San Francisco. Tachyon. 2018. 288 pages.

The alternate history subgenre of speculative fiction, and especially alternate history written by Jewish writers, often takes the form of meditations on the real history and could-have-beens of nation-states. Jewish alternate history, like World Fantasy Award-winning author Lavie Tidhar's newest novel, *Unholy Land*, often poses what-ifs about the

existence of a Jewish state. In Tidhar's novel, the modern equivalent of our Israel was founded instead in sub-Saharan Africa, bordering Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania—and it is the extrapolation of a real-world attempt by Zionist leader Theodor Herzl to find a home for Jews in 1904, aided by the British government, once called the "Uganda Plan."

Unholy Land opens in Palestina, a modern Jewish state in constant conflict with the indigenous Nandi people who were displaced by the Jewish settlers who founded the nation; relations with the surrounding African nations are uneasy. Israel is unheard of, but Tidhar's "Palestinians" find themselves in much the same situation as Israelis today, with an increasingly right-wing

government, a massive wall being erected to "keep out" the Nandi and other Africans, and a slow-burning conflict that unfolds through occasional Nandi bombings and Palestina's harsh military retaliations against Nandi civilians living in the camps of the Occupied Territories.

But we learn that the world in which Palestina came to be is only one of many worlds making up the realms of possibilities known to the border agency that defends the stability of the multiple realities known as the "sephiroth." This Kabbalistic term is the base technology upon which Tidhar's speculative fantasy, about a character not unlike the author himself, a "pulp" writer named Lior Tirosh, is built. The novel follows Lior as he navigates a return to Palestina, only to discover that he is trapped between realities; pursued by border agents like Bloom, who wants him dead, and Nur, who wants



Linda Berrón
The Dossier
Trans. Mayela Vallejos Ramírez & Edward Waters Hood
Chiringa Press

A Spanish-born writer and educator currently living in Costa Rica, Linda Berrón makes her novel debut in *The Dossier*. Revising the myth of Don Juan, this edition includes a preface by noted Latin American literature scholars Mayela Vallejos Ramírez and Edward Waters Hood. In form, it is a man's dive into his own romantic past and future in the form of his recording of lovers in one long dossier—until, of course, one woman breaks the cycle.



Best European Fiction 2019
Ed. Alex Andriessse
Dalkey Archive Press

Best European Fiction collects thirty-two works of fiction from across the European world, including numerous pieces in translation. It spans not only language but style and subject matter while running the gamut from lighthearted and humorous to deeply thoughtful and serious. It introduces the reader to the exquisite breadth of these literary traditions and yet never fails to remember that these all come from a thriving, worldwide "Republic of Letters" that reveals something new each time.

to save him, and fighting against his father, a general of Palestina plotting to colonize all realities on behalf of the Jews, Lior is unable to decide if he came originally from Palestina or our Israel. He saves the sephirots, haphazardly and accidentally, but must live his life in exile in Israel—his chosen home, if not his real one.

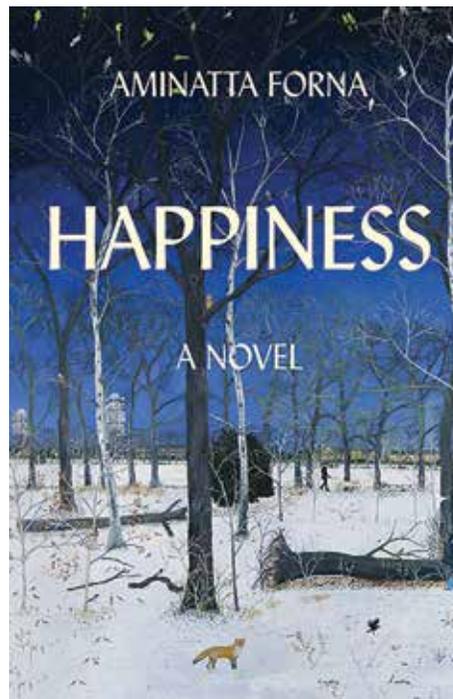
Like Tidhar's other work, *Unholy Land* is a complex and metatextual narrative, moving between first-, second-, and third-person narrators, that theorizes the work speculative fiction does—the possibilities and alternatives it imagines—and questions the worth of the “fantasy” writer in a world where nation-states maintain and legitimize their existence through the oppression of whole groups of people. It is, unsurprisingly, a powerful meditation on the ethics of history and the power of borders, an analogy, no doubt, to the border walls both on the West Bank and in Trump's presidential promises as much as to the ideologized divides that drive military and state conflict. *Unholy Land* is a call to imagine and fight for alternatives.

Sean Guynes-Vishniac
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Aminatta Forna *Happiness*

New York. Atlantic Monthly Press. 2018.
368 pages.

In writing workshops, I caution students against relying on coincidence to drive plot, as events that happen by chance are generally less interesting than those that develop out of a character's desires or fears. Yet Aminatta Forna, in her resonant fourth novel, *Happiness*, successfully employs coincidence on several occasions, in service to broader thematic concerns with connectivity. The book opens with a meet-cute worthy of a Meg Ryan movie—Attila, a Ghanaian psychiatrist, and Jean, an American scientist, collide on Waterloo Bridge, distracted by a fox named Light Bright,



whose behaviors Jean is tasked with observing as part of a study on urban foxes. With this opener, Forna implies that even in a vast urban landscape like London, chance moments of significant connection are possible, even inevitable.

The slow-burn relationship that develops between Attila and Jean undergirds the novel, while Forna uses London's vibrant ecosystem to examine the interconnectivity of living things: human, animal, and vegetal. Attila's is the most compelling voice. An outsized man in both personality and professional stature, he moves through the world with a captivating surety, breaking into dance when the mood strikes, delivering a controversial keynote address questioning his colleagues' interpretation of trauma's effects on people.

Next to Attila's natural magnetism, Jean's quieter perspective is largely overshadowed. Her plight on behalf of the foxes she studies, as well as the backstory about her past relationships, lack the propulsion of Attila's sections, which follow his efforts to locate the missing son of a relative as well as his work in conflict zones on behalf of the United Nations.

Still, Forna's prose is so crystalline, her observations about the human condition so psychologically astute, that it is easy to forgive this occasional unevenness. She also dares to make assertions that challenge her Western audience. Analyzing a countryman's response to his kidnapping and detention at the hands of Iraqi militants, Attila says: “Our [Africans'] expectations of life . . . are more modest than the European's. What I mean to say is that the script of life for most of us is, dare I say, a great deal more fluid . . . in other words, we know shit happens.”

In this way, Forna tweaks Western readers' smug assumptions about universality, even while reaffirming our common humanity through Jean and Attila's improbable love. All this confirms that she is a wise and subtle writer who delivers, time and again, stories that confront societal failings and celebrate the personal intimacies that redeem us.

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The Book of Rīga: A City in Short Fiction

Ed. Eva Eglāja-Kristsonsone & Becca Parkinson. Manchester, UK. Comma Press. 2018. 196 pages.

There could not be a more appropriate way to represent Riga than with a short-story collection. The Baltic nations, and Latvia certainly not least among them, have had a disjointed history of independence. Their most recent years of sovereign existence, therefore, have seemed a dream to many—a vision too good to be true. This same skepticism of beauty in the midst of undeniable miracles can be seen in many of the stories contained in *The Book of Rīga*, the thirteenth in a series by Comma Press profiling cities around the world through short fiction by local authors.

The consistent dichotomy in the stories gathered here is between the significance