
Susan Midalia’s collection *A History of the Beanbag* contains 16 stories, the best of them having an insidiously nightmarish quality where ordinary life is on the edge of unbearable.

Midalia is particularly good on the relationships between parent and child. There are two totally unsentimental stories dealing with the debilitating ordeal of bringing up demanding small boys: Midalia has two adult sons and it seems likely that these stories are based to some extent on personal experience. On the other hand, childlessness is a matter of regret for the wife of a repressed, morbidly respectable husband in ‘Put on your Dancing Shoes’: ‘there was no doubt that my husband considered children a physical inconvenience. … What choice did I have but to submit to his wishes, to pretend to see the world through his antiseptic, joyless eyes? What choice did I have but to feel the emptiness of my arms, my breasts, my heart?’ With ‘Legless’ the point of view moves from parent to child: a mentally disabled teenage boy is driven to violent brutality to defend his mother against the insolent toughs brought home by his brother. ‘A Voice in the Dark’ tells, in the first person, of the loveless marriage of her parents, her father subjecting her mother to constant humiliation and petty interference. This feels strongly autobiographical; unlike most of the other stories, this narrator is not distinguished from the author by being named. Later, similarly, there is a very nasty story about the narrator’s grandfather, who got away with murdering his beautiful wife in a jealous rage because he made exquisite shoes for the European nobility.
Several other stories feature violent or controlling men, but just as I was
deciding that the male sex was getting a particularly bad run, there appeared a kind,
understanding man who listens patiently to the confession of a new female friend in
‘Halfway Through the Nightmare’, and, in ‘Meteor Man’, a mild-mannered husband
and father trying to cope with the increasing disregard of his adolescent children. In a
couple of stories the onset of madness is charted with frightening specificity. ‘Such a
Shame’ charts fifty years of racism against Aborigines in five numbered parts,
echoing the chronicle format of the title story, ‘A History of the Beanbag’. ‘It’s Only
Words’ is one of several stories which has a narrator alive to the ‘wondrousness of
words’: Silvia and Helen – both named after the famous beauties – together find in
language and literature a source not only of juvenile delight but of more mature solace
when the need arises.

The weakest of these stories also invokes a literary connection. In ‘A Comedy
of Manners’ a middle-aged woman in the habit of berating her husband about the bad
manners of modern youth is confronted with a racist, intolerant, garrulous neighbour,
who, as she realizes ‘with some dismay, was herself writ large, a cartoon Mrs Elton to
her complacent Emma.’ This story, though, with its contrivance and psychological
improbability, is uncharacteristic of the rest of this collection. While many of the
other stories also play with language and literary allusions, they are disturbing, often
deeply personal and sometimes shockingly plausible, and each is subtly different in
voice and mood.