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This is the author’s radio script of this article.
Cross-cultural marriages produce not only interesting and sometimes unsettled offspring, but a plethora of autobiographical fictions. One of the latest of these is *The Memory of Salt*, by Alice Melike Ülgezer. Her narrator, Ali, is the child of a Turkish musician who married an Australian doctor he met in Afghanistan. The father, known for some reason both as Ahmet and Aykut, or Baba to his son, is devout, profane, unpredictable, violent, beautiful and insane. The mother, who also has an odd and unexplained name, Mac, is a strong woman who can only put up with so much, and after a few years the marriage is over. The novel seems to be concerned with the son’s attempt to reconcile his adoration of his largely absent father with his loyalty to his mother. Why the female author of this novel has chosen a male persona to narrate the story of her parents’ marriage is a puzzle. For some time I thought that Ali might be short for Alice, the author’s first name, but although I don’t think it’s ever made explicit, the character is certainly male. In other ways the novel seems to abjure the niceties of fiction: the character’s surname seems to be the same as the author’s, and Ahmet Ülgezer is acknowledged for help with the Turkish language.

Formally, the narrator of the novel is Ali. But much of it consists of his retelling of the history of his mother’s relationship with his father, through her eyes. A journal or notebook is mentioned, which he reads, illicitly, but still this narrative goes far beyond what he could plausibly know and must be understood as imaginative reconstruction. This thread of narrative is jumbled together with Ali’s own memories of his father. The childhood memories are almost invariably prefaced, ‘I must’ve been’ about four, or seven, or whatever. Once beyond puberty, however, Ali becomes coy about his age. As a result, reading this novel is an extremely confusing process. We are never aware when the narrative present is, and there is no apparent logical sequence to the flashbacks. Thus, for example, the climax arrives a full two hundred pages after the conversation between Ali and his mother which sparked it.

This confusion is one of the difficulties this novel presents to the reader. The other major problem is the prose. There are many instances of either malapropisms, or perhaps word-play which misfires – ‘the salt sea fog hankered heavily down our necks’; ‘the two dogs caterwauled around the front garden leaping in his way’; ‘Baba winkled back’. In the last instance, I presume Ülgezer means ‘winked’ but perhaps intends an echo of ‘twinkled’. Elsewhere, though, there is an extraordinary amount of winking in this novel, often at the most inappropriate times. But the besetting sin is overwriting. For me, poetic prose works best in small doses. Ülgezer’s prose is too often drenched with images: ‘Her platinum girlhood, gingham-checked to over-locked perfection’; or imprecise to the point of exasperation: ‘I knew then that she had divined some immaculate binding flaw between us, some binding knot.’ Why immaculate? Is it a knot or a flaw? How can a flaw bind? It’s true that this overwriting is chiefly a problem in the first part of the novel, and later there are passages which work much better. I liked Ali’s admission that he loved his father ‘absolutely for his astute, uncompromising craziness, his bravery and his bloody, foolish gullibility.’

I often wonder how much an author is entitled to ask of her readers. I think the answer is that she can ask a lot, but must offer them something to make their hard work worthwhile. Though we are rewarded with the beguiling and memorable figure of Ali’s Baba, for me *The Memory of Salt* is too demanding, with its unsorted jigsaw of a narrative, its often untranslated Turkish and unexplained German phrases, and its imprecise and overblown prose.