

**Shahd Alshammari, *Notes on the Flesh* (Faraxa Publishing, 2017)**

Gone are the days of triumph narratives where chronology moves from good health to a catastrophic loss of health, and ends, finally, with an enviable level of acceptance – *thank goodness*. Illness doesn't work that way so why should the narrative? It's too simplistic a telling and shows us nothing of the fractures of the self that won't heal. The current trend of the genre embraces a non-linear form, experimentation with fragments and unconventional structures, which not only makes reading a more stimulating practice, but also reflects the fluctuations of the dis-eased body and the mental work that accompanies it. In the prologue to *Notes on the Flesh*, Shahd Alshammari promises as much by saying her book is what Audre Lorde calls a biomythograph, where the story of the individual is an interwoven tapestry of different genres and realities. She writes:

Fiction, nonfiction, poetry, history, they are all part of the narrative. *Notes on the Flesh* is written on the body, from the body, from existence, from the experience of being here, fully here, and sometimes, only there in my head, or through someone else's story, living vicariously through someone. Some of these stories are narrated by others, and as always, there is no boundary between the self and the other. (iv)

This is what I'm interested in as a movement forward in the genre, though I'm not quite sure this book has reached its biomythographic potential.

What we begin with is a young Kuwaiti girl caught between two cultures; her mother is a Western-looking Palestinian and her father a Bedouin with strictly Arabic values. She refers to her and others like her as hybrids. 'I never could understand the concept of belonging, of fitting in' (3). The flesh then begins in a place of culturally smeared boundaries and liminalities, allowing readers to glide, rather than leap, into a similar corporal space. Before we get there, though, Alshammari offers up a memoir of the female body trying to determine its worth in a landscape of a traditionalist patriarchal society. How to be seen when you're supposed to be hidden? How to understand sexuality when for women it's forbidden? She poses these questions calmly and almost blamelessly through glimpses of crushes, friendships and love. A diagnosis of MS, however, intensifies her thinking and we see that the analogy between the second citizen status and disability is a focus of the self.

Part I is called 'Mythography' but it reads as a straightforward biography chronologically told. It's not until we get to Part II, 'Voices of Lovers', that we meet new narrators and characters and follow new plotlines. We're told in the author's bio that *Notes on the Flesh* is Alshammari's first collection of short stories, but I see only Part II as having fictional stories, and even that is confused because the stories of others are interspersed with a continuation of the autobiography of Part I. Structurally, this doesn't do the word 'biomythography' justice and it doesn't work as a strengthening device for the book. Its randomness is ultimately a lack of randomness, it's balance officially unbalanced. I'm left confused about the author's decision to

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switch things up half way through the book whilst attempting to follow-through with her memoir when I wanted the experimentation with form to *inform* my reading.

Part II, however, is where the book thematically comes together. Alshammari's 'notes' (read 'short short stories') on the difficulty of holding onto love for female Muslims in the Middle East mirrors that of the memoirist's experience of losing the love of a man due to her illness. Intersectionality's at work here and it's a strong point in this book. Neither Alshammari nor her ill-fated lovers can catch a break because this is not a triumph narrative at all; it's a book full of complexities that are written on the flesh and sewn into the psyche. The deeper Alshammari's body falls into her illness (falls into love) and meets with disappointment, the stronger her determination is: 'Marriage was a social contract, a contract that made no sense to me at all. It was about products, about how good the goods were, and whether you were worth purchasing' (78).

There is much to praise in this book though I'm unconvinced with the language's simplicity and dependency on cliché ('Everyone around us looked the same; everyone had the same features – everyone except him' [87]), and too often the author reverts to an amateurish summing-up, complete with italics to really drive in the point ('*But I didn't understand, and I couldn't forgive him. Like the doctors, he had betrayed me*' [98]), but I believe it's a bold book, an illuminating one, and one worthy of discussion. I point to the epilogue:

Is myself just my body? Must it be a body that is lovable? A body that is healed only through love? Whose love? Should it be mine? Is self-love the answer? But we need human connection, human touch. We need to be acknowledged, approved as worthy of love, deemed human, stamped as 'good'. To break away from boundaries, borders of the mind, the taboo of the body, what is it we need? Is it just desire? And, is desire for the terminally ill romantic? (111)

I commend her for tackling these questions with honesty, imagination and creativity.

**Heather Taylor Johnson**