

Etgar Keret. *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to Be God and Other Stories*. Pan Macmillan, 2003.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide
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Etgar Keret is an Israeli writer who was in Adelaide for Writers' Week. His specialty is short stories, some as short as four or five pages; mordant stories about death, life, and life after death.

Etgar Keret's book *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to Be God and other stories*, was published in Australia last year. Keret writes in Hebrew, but his unnamed translators have done an exceptional job. There are echoes of great writers like Beckett and Camus, but he has his own colloquial, matter-of-fact voice, both innocent and knowing, almost childlike, which seems to have translated very well into English.

Keret has an unusual explanation for starting to write. Like all young Israelis, he had to serve his term in the Army. Finding it difficult to conform as much as he needed to to stay out of trouble, he resorted to writing in secret to maintain his sense of himself. His popularity is a bonus: he didn't even intend to publish his early stories. He describes his writing technique as like surfing – catching a wave and seeing where it takes him.

These are stories of youth. Even the dead people in his stories are young. The stories are bizarre but full of insight. One story, 'Pipes', begins like this:

When I got to seventh grade, they had a psychologist come to school and put us through a bunch of adjustment tests. He showed me twenty different flash cards, one by one, and asked me what was wrong with the pictures. They all seemed fine to me, but he insisted and showed me the first picture again – the one with the kid in it. "What's wrong with this picture" he asked in a tired voice. I told him the picture seemed fine. He got really mad and said, "Can't you see the boy in the picture doesn't have any ears?" The truth is that when I looked at the picture again, I did see that the kid had no ears. But the picture still seemed fine to me. The psychologist classified me as "suffering from severe perceptual disorders" and had me transferred to carpentry school.

Here we can see the frustration of someone who has to struggle to maintain his selfhood. The end of this little story is surprising and oddly cheerful, with a characteristic eschatological twist. There are 21 short stories in *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to Be God*, and one novella, 50 pages long, called 'Kneller's Happy Campers'. In an almost deadpan tone, he describes an afterlife for suicides – place that 'mostly ... reminds me of Tel Aviv. My roommate, the German, says this place could just as well be Frankfurt. I guess Frankfurt's a dump, too.' Not a great deal happens in this story, but it is full of little unexpected twists and encounters.

Keret does not often write directly about the situation in present-day Israel, finding it easier to approach the problem obliquely. There is one disturbing story about a confrontation between an Israeli soldier and an Arab; and of course Israel is the setting for most of the stories – either Israel, or life after death in Israel. But there is no political message. Keret is struck, he says, by the dislocation between the horror that he knows from television is happening all around, and the banality of normal life in a chronically violent society, where people stop thinking about suffering or violence and become as obsessed by trivia as anyone else. This sense of the absurd is always evident in these stories, whether in the little boy who loves his piggy bank and can't bear to break it to retrieve his savings, or the thugs who stop their violent assault on a young boy because they are brought to attention by the siren on Remembrance Day. With a strong instinct for the ridiculous, Keret's stories continually discover the gap between ideals and action.