The Violent Century

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Lavie Tidhar. *The Violent Century*. Tachyon, 2019. (Originally published Hodder & Stoughton, 2013.) Paperback. 316 pp. $16.95. ISBN 9781616963163.

TACHYON'S reissuing of older works (as well as the publication of new ones) by Israeli-British author Lavie Tidhar is an incredibly welcome gift. Tidhar's concern with shifting perceptions of history is increasingly relevant in an age where an objective chronicle of facts seems increasingly like an outdated product of a more innocent age. In his 2011 World Fantasy Award-winning novel *Osama*, he told the story of a world in which the 9/11 mastermind is a fictional character. In the masterful 2014 *A Man Lies Dreaming*, World War II never happened because Adolf Hitler was never made Chancellor of Germany and fled to Great Britain, where he ekes out a noirish life as a ratty private detective. Tidhar's most recent novel, *Unholy Land* (2018), is set in a Jewish state planted in East Africa (reminiscent of the real-life Uganda Plan of the early 1900s) where settlers clash with the natives they have violently displaced and which turns out to be only one of multiple potential realities. In Tidhar's hands, history is a set of alternatives and reality is fluid; it's an atmosphere that seems downright sensible, even oddly comforting, in a world where many of us would welcome potential different avenues for history to take.

Tidhar is certainly one of our more noirish sf writers working today, given his concern with investigating dark conflicts carried out in the shadows of the world (Dark both literally and metaphorically—the first line in the novel is "*A gunshot in the fog*," and one of the opening scenes features a man walking along London's South Bank, alone on a foggy night, in search of an obscure, out-of-the-way pub: quite noir, indeed). This also might very well earn him the title of SF's John Le Carre, especially with *The Violent Century*, which has all the hallmarks of a Le Carre work—espionage carried out by world-weary veterans, shifting loyalties, and desperate attempts to remain human in a tense atmosphere of clashes among faceless international powers. Part of Le Carre's genius has always been to show the deeply human, deeply ordinary side of espionage, and Tidhar matches him well in *Violent Century* (adding a dollop of superheroism to give it some spice).

The Violent Century is almost entirely set (except for a few flashbacks and a few scenes set in the present day) in an alternate World War II, fought in the aftermath of a 1932 experiment by German scientist Dr. Joachim Vomacht. That quantum experiment resulted in the creation, all across the world, of people imbued with superpowers. Naturally enough these heroes (or *Ubermenschen)* are brought into the worldwide conflict by the warring powers, fighting both on open battlefields and in the shadow realm of wartime espionage. This situation may seem similar to, for example, that depicted in the DC comic book series *Watchmen* (and its 2019 television sequel) or the George R.R. Martin-created and co-edited *Wild Cards* shared universe, both of which depict the political and social effects of superheroes on a "real" world. And those similarities are, indeed, present. However, those works—despite their frequent moments of bitterness and cynicism—are still rooted in a very American sense of colorful costumed personalities battling each other and who are larger than the ordinary lives around them. Tidhar's protagonists, though, are, despite their powers, small people rooted very much in the ordinary.

The novel's 'heroes' are British operatives who work for an MI6-like agency called the Bureau for Superannuated Affairs (no Avengers or Justice League here!). British superheroes are dull, with aliases that are stunning in their uncreativity. The two main characters are given the names Fogg (his power is, shockingly, generating fog) and Oblivion (whose power is to negate things and make them vanish forever); their colleagues include Spit (who emits saliva that can fly strong and hard like a bullet), Blur (super speed), and Tank (big and strong). The names are direct and uninspired, as gray as the declining British Empire they serve. By contrast, American heroes are right out of comic books, with bright costumes and names like Whirlwind, Tigerman, and the Green Gunman; Soviet heroes bear equally dramatic names like the Red Sickle and Rusalka, and German ones are called Schneesturm (Snowstorm) and Der Wolfsmann (The Wolf Man).

This very British understatement is part of the plan: as Fogg's superior 'the Old Man' says to him, "We need men like you. Do not be tempted by the Americans, the loudness, the colour. We are the grey men, we are the shadow men, we watch but are not seen" (134). The word *shadow* is telling, and it recurs throughout the novel: Fogg and his colleagues are "the shadow men of a shadow war" (106). Fogg is called "the shadow man" by his great love, a German woman named Clara (which means "clear" or "bright") whose power is to, essentially, bring things into the light. And the postwar period is only a pale reflection of that shattering conflict: "Everything else is a shadow of that war" (229). Tidhar's use of the word stresses that his characters are only obscured reflections of some deeper reality, unlike traditional comic book heroes and villains that bring light and noise and thunder to their worlds. While they will never be mistaken for merely human, Tidhar's characters are nothing but.

And therein lies the sadness and the fear at the heart of *The Violent Century*. *Why* is the century so violent? Because regular human beings have made it so, without the need for superheroes, who are almost afterthoughts to the struggles of real people. Because, as Cory Doctorow notes in his introduction to the novel, "[t]hat's the real terror, after all: that our lives are tossed around not by the brilliant, all-powerful supermen, but rather by people whose pettiness, fears, and weaknesses are as bad as our own" (v). The real Hitler, the real Mengele, are more monstrous than any supervillain, and the inhumanity that ordinary men can wreak on each other is more powerful than any superpower. That may seem cliché, but it is no less true, as Tidhar works to make clear.

The traditional comic book hero has little place in Tidhar's world, as the traditional James Bondian superspy has no place in Le Carre's. There is a wonderfully meta scene set during Vomacht's 1964 trial (based on Adolf Eichmann's real-life 1962 trial), in which an American historian of superheroes, Joseph Shuster (in real life the co-creator of Superman), testifies to the definition of a hero, in the process setting apart characters like Fogg and Oblivion from Tigerman and Whirlwind.

Those of us who came out of that war, he says. And before that. From pogroms and persecution and to the New World. To a different kind of persecution, perhaps, But also *hope*. Our dreams of heroes come from that, I think. Our American heroes are the wish-fulfilment of immigrants, dazzled by the brashness and the colour of this new world, by its sheer size. We needed larger-than-life heroes, masked heroes to show us that they were the fantasy within each and every one of us. The Vomacht wave did not make them. It *released* them. Our shared hallucination, our faith. Our faith in heroes. This is why you see our American heroes but never their British counterpart. Ours is the rise of Empire, theirs is the decline. Ours seek the limelight, while their skulk in shadows…We *need* heroes. (227)

It is a beautiful, heartfelt statement about the importance of heroes. However, as Tidhar shows, it is also completely wrong. American heroes help the CIA conduct its secret war in Laos and Vietnam. Russian heroes succumb to alcoholism and are considered abominations by the *mujahedeen* in Afghanistan who fight Soviet occupation. Former Nazi *ubermenschen* are reborn in the US as advertising shills for children's breakfast cereals. And no hero anywhere flies out of the sky to stop the crashing of two planes into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. "That day we look up to the sky and see the death of heroes" (229). *The Violent Century* recognizes the very human emotional need for superheroes but hammers home the idea that those same heroes ultimately have little effect on history's onrush. In the latter part of the novel, Tidhar provides brief passages concerning historical events: despite the existence of heroes, nothing really changes. Atomic bombs are dropped on Japan, the Vietnam War grows and rages, the Berlin Wall is built, the Soviet Union invades Afghanistan. In a particularly telling passage, the comic book industry establishes the Comics Code Authority in 1954 –just as it did in our world—which chains the very notion of superheroes to suburban, middle-class respectability. In any world, it seems, heroes can be tamed. Someone from our world dropped into Tidhar's universe would see very little difference between the two.

The Violent Century, like much of Tidhar's output, is an excellent addition to the literature of shifting perceptions of reality, most obviously represented by Philip K. Dick. It is also an effective counterexample to the artificiality of "genre"—the novel is at once an alternate history, a spy novel, a story of superheroes, and a war novel. Fitting many boxes and at the same time none at all, Tidhar's novel (indeed, his entire literary career) demonstrates the imaginative power of fluidity to give us insights into the complex nature of our historical reality.