

Nine to Ninety: Stories across the generations

by Susan Ioannou

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Reviewed by Mary Barnes

Susan Ioannou, a Toronto writer well known for her poetry, has written a new book, a collection of fifteen narratives about ordinary women, from impressionable young girls to resilient aged women. The stories are rich in detail with each woman telling her story in her own unique voice.

The opening story, “A Taste of Darkness, a Square of Light,” presents us with Lucy, a young girl, who goes to stay with Grandpa Norm, who isn’t her grandfather, and Auntie Kay, who isn’t her aunt. The couple rent a house owned by the Miss Budes, two genteel sisters who live upstairs. Grandpa Norm, wounded in the Great War, gets around on crutches. Auntie Kay’s favourite word about everything in her life is “exquisite.”

When Auntie Kay meets Lucy at the train station, she calls her “Alice” because of the blue ribbon in her hair. And like Alice in Wonderland, Lucy begins an extraordinary adventure; she meets individuals as diverse as characters in a book and they will leave an indelible impression on her young mind.

With Grandpa Norm she visits his attic art studio — imagine a man with one leg hoisting himself up a ladder — and there she views his world. When Lucy remarks how dark the studio is, Grandpa Norm replies, “We all need a little darkness for our dreams”(6). Then he throws open the window and light floods in. He goes on to say of art and thus of life, “And when you’ve grown your idea big enough . . . you match your vision with the shape of the world”(7). It is this extra depth to Ioannou’s character that draws us to Grandpa Norm. He is at once enlightening and endearing. Despite his crippling injury, he has the far-sightedness to see what the light has to offer.

Next, Lucy and Auntie Kay visit Mrs. Welly, who has a house that reminds Lucy of Hansel and Gretel’s cottage with its gingerbread trim. While Lucy sits with Mrs. Welly, Auntie Kay visits with Charles, the mysterious man upstairs.

Mrs. Welly collects bells of all shapes and sizes, and Lucy is drawn to a long, thin bell, “full of scratches and dents” (14). This reference makes us realize that beneath all the coziness of material things we surround ourselves with — in Mrs. Welly’s case, her collection of bells, there remains an underlying mystery to life. Life is not perfect; it is not all light. Perhaps the man residing upstairs is dented and scratched. His state is not revealed to Lucy, but even to her tender years she has a cold feeling regarding him. Charles then remains the little bit of darkness Lucy encounters on her journey.

In the story “I’d Call that Kindness,” Ioannou introduces us to Beth, a dowdy, intellectual but naïve teen. Her friend, Melinda, tells her pointedly that Beth will “never attract a guy, looking liking that . . . burying yourself in ten-pound books” (116). But Beth attracts Melinda’s father, Rodney, with his “Michael Caine” smile. They begin seeing each other, which Beth regards as a little kindness towards her on Rodney’s part. Then one evening on a drive home from one of their assignments, he suggests she slide a little closer. Beth realizes then that the game they are playing is no longer innocent. By the time the story ends, Beth is wise enough to reach her own conclusions regarding Melinda’s father.

With “Ilse’s Vacuum,” the author tells the story of Elaine, a self-righteous and reclusive tenant living in a seniors’ complex, who objects to the noisy vacuum of her neighbour, Ilse. When Ilse later suffers a heart attack, it is Sophie, another neighbour, who pleads with Elaine to accompany her to church to pray for Ilse’s recovery. Here Elaine experiences an awakening that changes her view of Ilse.

The women portrayed in this book come from different generations but the author depicts each with sensitivity; her characters are captivating, from the inquisitive Lucy to the grumpy Elaine. We come to realize that women are not only mothers, sisters, daughters, and grandmothers, and Ioannou’s portrayal of their complexity pushes home the truth that women are distinct. Her rendering is both tender and tough. These are women with whom we want to sit down and share a cup of tea.

And the tea is just fine, Susan Ioannou. Just fine.

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