Dummy runs

LUCY POPESCU

Aminatta Forna

THE HIRED MAN
293pp. Bloomsbury. £16.99.
978 1 4088 1766 7

Norbert Gstrein

WINTERS IN THE SOUTH
Translated by Anthea Bell and Julian Evans
264pp. MacLehose. £16.99.
978 1 906694 30 2

The most recent Balkans conflict was shocking in its cruelty and, for many, difficult to comprehend. Two novels offer a new examination of Croatia's role in the war. What is refreshing about both these books, written by outsiders, is their impartiality, though neither author is a stranger to the repercussions of conflict. Aminatta Forna was raised in Sierra Leone and her memoir *The Devil That Danced on the Water* (2002) was an attempt to clear the name of her father, who was hanged for treason in 1975. *The English Years* (2002) by the Austrian writer Norbert Gstrein was about a Jewish author who fled Nazi Austria only to be interned as an undesirable alien on the Isle of Man.

In *The Hired Man*, an English woman, Laura, and her two children arrive in the small Croatian town of Gost. They've come to renovate a beautiful blue house that has remained derelict for the past sixteen years. Their neighbour, Duro, offers to help the family with repairs, and together with Laura's daughter, Grace, he uncovers a mosaic concealed beneath the plaster. As they restore it, hidden resentments among the townfolk begin to surface. What the family doesn't know is that Duro has a long association with the blue house, and is reconstructing a past that has powerful repercussions for the future. The conflict may be over, but memories of the bloodshed linger. Forna is eloquent on the far-reaching consequences of ethnic hatred. Two local men, Fabjan, the owner of the local bar, and Krešimir, Duro's childhood friend, appear to have sinister connections to the past. The three, we later learn, have blood on their hands – whether by shooting enemy soldiers, betraying a family to the death squads, or bearing responsibility for the murder of their neighbours.

Forna reveals a conspiracy of silence. Duro does not refer openly to the victims but alludes to them as "the people who use the word *hleb* for bread". The terrible ethnic cleansing is never spoken about. All that remains is the graveyard, a metaphor for the town's history. We are told: "There are different neighbourhoods for the rich and the poor and people who worship in one church and people who worship in another. Everything you need to know about Gost is here in the cemetery".

Winters in the South also explores the region's ethnic tensions, but from a different perspective. Gstrein recalls the end of the Second World War, when the Croatians who had allied with the Nazis tried to flee to Austria. Many were then returned to Tito's Partisans. Gstrein's central character, Marija, was six when she found refuge in Vienna with her mother. Her father never joined them and is presumed to have been killed.

Now aged fifty, Marija is adrift from her marriage and comfortable existence in Vienna. Though there are rumblings of war, she decides to return to Croatia in an attempt to find herself. She is unaware that her father managed to elude capture in 1945. Like many other fascists, he fled to Argentina where he has been waiting for the opportunity to resume the fight for Croatian independence. Focusing on the old man's obsession with the past, and his determination to exact revenge, Gstrein illustrates how old differences left to fester can lead to new conflict.

As war erupts, Marija's father begins preparations for his return. He hires Ludwig, a disgraced expat Austrian policeman, as his bodyguard, and installs a shooting range in his cellar. He gives the lifesized dummies names:

> a long list of candidates, among whom there always featured a former partisan general or a minister of the People's Republic of Yugoslavia whom he hadn't managed to dispatch himself yet, until Ludwig too knew the names of all these prominent figures by heart, consoling himself with the afterthought that many of these World War Two heroes and postwar fighters were already dead anyway.

Gstrein uses the various settings in his novel to draw parallels between the Axis occupation of Yugoslavia, the 1990s Balkans conflict and Argentina's Dirty War. Each of his characters has a different perspective on war, and Gstrein cleverly juxtaposes the ideology of the two men in Marija's life. Her husband is a renowned communist revolutionary and respected journalist whose anti-fascism sits uneasily with her father's fervent nationalism. The author's multi-layered approach and convoluted style may frustrate some readers, but Anthea Bell and Julian Evans have done a good job of rendering his complex sentence structure into accessible English prose.

A hand up

PETER C. BAKER

Mohsin Hamid

HOW TO GET FILTHY RICH IN RISING ASIA
240pp. Hamish Hamilton. £14.99.
978 0 241 14466 4

The formal conceit of Mohsin Hamid's third novel is that we are reading a self-help book about the secrets of business success in contemporary Asia. Each chapter's title suggests a step on the path to riches: "Move to the City", "Get a Job", "Befriend Bureaucrats". Most of the book, however, consists not of advice, or even parodies of advice, but of story. Only in the first few pages of each chapter does Hamid ape the banality of self-help, and even then he doesn't seem to take the conceit seriously. There are writers – Donald Barthelme, David Foster Wallace, Mary Robison – who have exploited mass-market cliché to reveal the pathos lurking beneath. But these authors let the banal sound banal. Hamid's "self-help" sections, by contrast, are merely an excuse for the author to expound playfully on literature and life.

The only generic component Hamid truly sticks with is the second-person voice. Self-help is, of course, all about "you", the reader; but each time a chapter's opening patter gives way to narrative, the "you" shifts from the abstract, and notional, to the specific. "You" is a boy, born in a village in an unnamed country that bears more than a passing resemblance to Pakistan, where Hamid was born and lives today. When the boy is young, his father moves the family to a chaotically expanding city. There he attends university, starts a water purification business, bribes the appropriate officials, gets married, and so on. "Work For Yourself", the book says, and he does. "Don't Fall in Love", it advises – but he can't seem to avoid it.

Between chapters, years pass. The speed at which this happens threatens to give the narrative a rather threadbare quality. This is frequently averted, however, by the workings of the second-person voice – previously employed by Hamid to great effect in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (reviewed in the *TLS*, October 12, 2007). Any holes Hamid leaves in "you" (the character), you the reader will be tempted to plug with personal experience. This dynamic is part of all literary engagement, but it is particularly central here – and particularly fraught, too, given that so many of Hamid's readers are likely to know so little about the type of life he depicts. Hamid makes light of this early on in his description of the protagonist's experience of childhood illness: "Your anguish is the anguish of a boy whose chocolate has been thrown away, whose remote controls are out of batteries, whose scooter is busted, whose new sneakers have been stolen. This is all the more remarkable since you've never in your life seen any of these things". This is clever, and even unsettling, but it articulates a problem instead of solving it.

At its thinnest points, *How To Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* feels like a current affairs lesson. But it is also a technically deft page-turner. Its nameless protagonist may remain more of an everyman than an individual, but that doesn't stop us from caring whether he will make it. In the end he is old, his body failing, his country similarly decrepit, thanks in part to the predations of profit-hungry Americans. We are moved by his changes in fortune, but his story is also curiously forgettable. So much of Hamid's energy is given over to seducing the reader – and then, suddenly, it's over.

Jami Attenberg

THE MIDDLESTEINS
288pp. Serpent's Tail. Paperback, £11.99.
978 1 84668 932 1

"Steaming, plush pork buns", "bright green pickles bursting with vinegar and salt", "cherry pastries covered with half-melted squiggles of frosting" are just a selection of the feasts that Edie Middlestein – Jami Attenberg's central character – eats her way through during the course of *The Middlesteins*. It is a good idea not to read Attenberg's third novel when you are hungry. Fifty-nine-year-old Edie is morbidly obese. Her eating habits are killing her, but she will not stop and, frustratingly for her family, nor will she be helped. Just before a second stent procedure in her leg, and with Edie facing a heart bypass operation, her husband Richard leaves her after thirty years of marriage.

The novel looks at how the family reacts to the ensuing crisis. A series of portraits emerge as depicted by Edie and several other characters connected through blood, marriage or community to this suburban Jewish family in Chicago. Chapters neatly alternate between the characters' perspectives to build an engaging picture of these individual lives. Multi-perspective narrative is familiar territory for Attenberg, whose debut collection, *Instant Love* (2006), adopted the viewpoints of three main characters, along with their friends and lovers.

The characters in *The Middlesteins* are vivid and complex, their foibles both endearing and repulsive. Edie, an ex-lawyer, is admirably forthright ("we had all feared Edie at one time or another. The woman knew how to make a point"), and, despite being "six feet tall, and shaped like a massive egg", she can seem attractive. But her compulsive over-eating is the basis of the "sickening mixture of heartbreak and mortality" in the family, and she is often arrogant and careless.

Attenberg's nimble tragicomedy breathes new life into the well-worn subject of obesity in America. Her humour rescues the novel from sentimentality, such as in Richard's comically calamitous internet dating that leads him to a despairing moment with a "half hooker", or the description of "morbidly curious" Rachelle, who stalks her mother-in-law as she visits three different restaurants in the space of half an hour. Rachelle almost admiringly watches Edie toss takeaway wrappers out of her car window into bins with "perfect aim"; but her "pure sadness" quickly takes over. Rachelle's facial transition – "her lips downturned gently, her mouth given in to the grief" – is later echoed when her son inappropriately turns a plate of biscuits into the shape of a smiley face at a funeral.

Attenberg does give her characters a moderate sense of resolution, despite the tragedy they must confront. She has created a familiar domestic drama about disappointment, pain, loneliness and mortality – even if the novel's emotional impact is limited.

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL