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Normal Deviation: A Weird Fiction Anthology.

Edited by Lyle Skains and De Ann Bell.

Wonderbox Publishing, 2018. 225pp.

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Normal Deviation: *A Weird Fiction Anthology* comprises a commendably varied collection of twenty-two short stories. Born from a desire to create an anthology "based on a weird ass picture," editors Lyle Skains and DeAnn Bell source ekphrastic responses to Valery Sidelnykov's photograph, "Suitcase" (223). To eschew "clichés and genre tropes," Skains and Bell then introduce "Third Option Thinking," an exercise in creative practice whereby contributors conceive three stories, discard the first two, and develop the third (223). Proposing that initial ideas necessarily draw upon previously encountered works, Third Option Thinking intends to encourage new narratives in a manner reminiscent of the Surrealists' use of automatic writing. Consequently, *Normal Deviation* contains a range of forms, styles, and genres. Each tale takes a different approach to Sidelnykov's image and to writing Weird fiction. Some draw on the Old Weird traditions of madness and unreliable narrators; others reflect the New Weird's interest in the fantastic and the ecological. Yet despite this variance, frequent themes reoccur, including light versus dark, political unrest, and eco-horror.

The most frequent mode within the anthology is perhaps the most difficult: comedy. "On Location," by Jonathan Howard, both succeeds and fails in opening the collection, providing supernatural scares while being burdened by a less than humorous narrative voice. Adopting the perspective of the photographer of Sidelnykov's image, the narrator's attempts at cracking wise, including references to "*The Clichéd Photographer Guide,*" come at the cost of undermining the unsettling narrative (1). Jesse Rodriguez's "Prophecy" and Chris Loud's "A Young Evil Departs" also lack effective humor. Rodriguez writes a metafictional tale where the editors are seeking "the Chosen One hidden among the Third Option Deviation submissions," while Loud's work lacks a consistent tone, as a rebellious youth ruminates on the nature of evil alongside exclamations of needing to "GET THE FUCK OUT" (Rodriguez 47; Loud 67).

Buoyed by its characterization, Cath Barton's "Conjuring Tricks" proves more successful. Imagining two actors, Jan and Melchior, auditioning to be a part of a new work by "The Master," it provides wonderfully comic stereotypes of aspiring thespians before taking a sinister turn. L. G. Keltner's "Becoming Death's Personal Assistant," however, is the collection's funniest tale. A wry take on the afterlife reminiscent of Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice* (1988), after the protagonist accidentally dies she finds herself working for Death in the bureaucracy of the underworld. With a clear grasp of its sardonic tone, yet with emotional depth beyond the laughter, Keltner's is a clear comic success.

Also threaded throughout *Normal Deviation* is the genre of science fiction, first introduced to the collection with DeAnn Bell's queer romance, "Blind Date." Possessing a nonlinear, epistolary structure, the narrative drifts between different stages of "bond mates," Nina and Haven's relationship, as they orbit a supermassive black hole (6). Despite some initial jargon, Bell's work flourishes into a tale of two lovers separated by time. Josh Dygert's "The Judges and the Suitcase," meanwhile, reminds of John Wyndham's cozy catastrophes. In the desert outside the fictional town of Discomber, Nevada, two "strange silent aliens" arrive (169). Progressing from first contact to vigils, war to apathy, the tale critiques human reactions to unknown entities and our innate aggressive desires.

However, Science Fiction also houses the weakest story of the collection, Jetse de Vries's "Where Angels Fear to Tread." Engaging intertextually with H. P. Lovecraft, Vries also inherits the worst indulgences of Lovecraft's writings, reaching for absurdity but finding incoherence. A graduate scientific researcher is accepted into Miskatonic University's Shenzhen research station, an accelerated space where time moves so swiftly that its inhabitants are ceaselessly mutating. As the protagonist himself begins to morph, lines such as "what the hell, I'm a hermaphrodite!" hint at the unfortunate gender politics that follow (25).

Faring better, the collection's sole Fantasy offering, Olivia Berrier's "Three and a Half Thoughts," tells the story of a former royal guard attempting to become an assassin for the Muaaji Shadows. While replete with the genre tropes that Skains and Bell sought to avoid, it paces its world-building efficiently, and the story is no less enjoyable because of its generic roots.

Moving to historical fiction, Sam Hirte-Runtsch's "Lumière, Noir, et la Valise" takes place against the well-realized backdrop of German-occupied Paris. However, its narrative of two opposing factions loses impact due to its similarity to other tales. "Moirai," by Molly McLellan, blends Nazi history with Greek myth, as Colonel Stauffenberg finds himself being judged by the Fates. Possessing similar tones of bureaucracy to Keltner, McLellan misses the same heights due to an uncertain tone and a slightly overlong narrative.

The standout historical piece, Emma Venables's "Good Night, Travel Well," is set during the days of "World Wars, Great Depressions, and National Socialism" (183). Hannelore and Silke, a grandmother and her granddaughter, strive to survive in Bolshevik invaded Germany. Adopting the tone of a Grimm fairy

tale, Venables is uncompromising in her exploration of rape, abuse, and trauma. Yet, the familial bonds between Hannelore and Silke are what truly sustain the story.

Indeed, the anthology's most resonant works largely forgo the narrative inclusion of Sidelnykov's image, instead drawing on it thematically. Arathi Menon's "A Suitcase of Small Stories" moves through non-human perspectives, inhabiting the objects found within a man's suitcase. A stamp, a twig, a safety pin: these curios recount moments of their owner's life, of missed opportunities and those finally taken before a concluding injection of existential weirdness. "No More Clouds," by Dan Cox, updates the unreliable narrators of Edgar Allan Poe to explore dementia, with an elderly gentleman taking the train with his partner whom he claims suffers from "manias and delusions" (64). Lastly, "Gemini," by Charlie Wilson, also engages with the hereditary nature of mental illness, as the protagonist wakes every day to her personality being decided by a white and a black doll inherited from her mother: "they tell me who I'm going to be today" (77).

In a particularly fascinating theme, Nicola Thompson's "The Fly Catchers" and Clare Weze's "Take Back Control" both provide ecological takes on Weird fiction. Thompson evokes Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014), as a young woman, hunted across the desert, finds refuge in a subterranean kingdom of sentient plants. Reinventing classic Old Weird tropes to reflect modern anxieties, here the human relationship to nature is intrinsically ugly. Meanwhile, in a tremendous work of flash fiction, Weze uses the life of a moth to ruminate on the afterlife, fairy tales, and changing bodies: "when you finally see the fairy tale for what it is, there's nothing but relief" (151).

Finally, the collection's political stories all find their mark. Though occasionally circuitous in its structure and dialogue, Joanna Michal Hoyt's "The Last Protest" critiques our current democratically-divided dystopias, as two protestors set about undoing the damage caused by "the Directorate." "The Lost and the Found," by Amanda Marples, imagines cities where homeless children are "Lost." A woman named "the Director" rescues these children and takes them to her home, where they are fed, clothed, and housed, so long as they work and perform for tourists. With shades of China Miéville and Margaret Atwood, Marples provides an excellent capitalist critique wrapped up in a Young Adult package.

Josephine Bruni's "Brexit," however, is undoubtedly the strongest story of the whole collection. A politically-charged attack on British patriotism, fears of immigration, and the Brexit saga, it follows an Italian immigrant who "had left nepotism and bribes, the cocky self-assurance of a governing body full of contempt for the poor," to find a new life in England (128). Following the protagonist working in a coffee shop on the eve and aftermath of the Brexit vote, Bruni's tale could not be more removed from traditional conceptions of Weird fiction, but remains incredibly moving, poignant, and urgent.

Unfortunately, the closing stories end the collection on a relatively moot note. "One Way Out," by Dean Knight, suggests a Climate Fiction narrative, but like Vreis before him it proves incomprehensible, with an unclear sense of character and place. Lyle Skains concludes the anthology with "To the After," creating an entire dystopian landscape complete with culture, societies, and subterranean methods of living. However, the interspersed narrative of aliens cycling through different species risks this final story juggling too many ideas.

Overall, *Normal Deviation* is a success. At times, the conceit of Sidelnykov's image proves an unfortunate bridle, returning the stories to the same core concept which Third Option Thinking may have undone. As contributors attempt to narratively integrate the image into their works, "Suitcase" begins to become a *cliché* itself, its two robed figures wearing unfortunately thin. However, the quality of the anthology's strongest works makes up for this occasional repetition. "Brexit," "Gemini," "The Fly Catchers," and "Take Back Control" each draw on Sidelnykov's work thematically, using the photograph as a launching point for their own narratives. Considering the stories individually, *Normal Deviation* does forget its own position as a Weird fiction anthology. However, taken as a whole, it is a wonderfully weird journey worth taking.

About the author

Michael Wheatley is a creative writing and practice-based PhD student at Royal Holloway, University of London, UK. Through creative and critical research, his thesis re-evaluates Weird fiction as an ecological mode that can help us engage with our currentclimate crisis. His debut collection of short stories, The Writers' Block (BlackPear Press, 2019), explores mental health, the creative process, and the perception of the tortured artist. Further creative and critical work has been published in numerous literary journals and online magazines.