BOOK REVIEW: 'BLAUSTEIN'S KISS' TELLS STORIES OF LOVE, LOSS AND NEW BEGINNINGS

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By Nancy Novick

You don't have to be Jewish to enjoy Judith Felsenfeld's collection of short stories about mainly Jewish characters—but you might relate to the stories better if you're in the right age demographic. The characters in *Blaustein's Kiss* are, for the most part, adults in mid-life and later, dealing with pleasures and problems that cross ethnic and religious lines, including infidelity, divorce, disease, complicated relationships with adult children and ex-spouses, aging parents, and intimations of mortality. The stories, for the most part, are set in and around the Upper West Side.

Four of the stories are set in, or are somehow related to, the placement of older people in nursing homes. In "Life List" Felsenfeld movingly captures the struggle of recently-widowed Julia. Faced with the need to move her mother to an Alzheimer's unit, Julia is devastated when she learns that her mother must be "restrained in a therapeutic chair" while she adjusts to her new environment. Julia's friends are not faring much better; one is coping with pulmonary surgery and an acrimonious divorce, another with impending blindness, and another with mudslides and fires in California, where he has transplanted his aging mother. It is hard not to sympathize with Julia, a person who is striving to do good and to stay connected with her mother and her adult daughter. Felsenfeld's description are evocative:

> *"Meanwhile I flinch every time the phone rings and spend as much time out of the apartment as I can, which is problematical since my computer and fax are there, in my daughter's former bedroom where, under her poster of Thich Nhat Hanh, I write grant proposals for Planned Parenthood. Instead I walk a lot in Central Park…and also on Broadway, where every few blocks I pass someone who seems a likely candidate for chair restraint."*

Fortunately, there is unexpected joy in some of the stories. The author's depictions of a very late-in-life love affair, a woman finding the courage to try a committed relationship after a long period of keeping her lover at arm's length, and ex-partners who come together to bring their dying dog to the vet, are poignant and memorable.

Blaustein's Kiss, the story for which the collection is named, is particularly well-written. Told in alternating sections that reflect the point-of-view of the two main characters, the story recounts an incident in which Blaustein, who is grieving over the loss of his fellow nursing home resident (and lover) Ceil, makes a sexual overture toward Meryl, Ceil's daughter. Both repulsed by, and sympathetic to, the man's yearning to connect, grieving Meryl struggles with her feelings and how to put the incident in context. The reader, too, is invited to understand Blaustein's plight, even in the small details, "[He] feels less and less inclination to read [the Times], to follow with his magnifying glass line after line of hypocrisy and heartache. The truth is, he will not be around to know the ending to these awful stories."

Felsenfeld makes only the occasional false step in her portrayals of characters in difficult circumstances. In "Rosie," the protagonist, Lucy, is unexpectedly called upon to take care of her granddaughter, when the child's mother (who lives across the country) contracts viral paralysis. Although the reader is assured early on that the mother will recover, otherwise compassionate Lucy and her ex-husband, Arthur, seem curiously detached from their daughter's plight. Lucy's first-person narrative also strikes a jarring note when she addresses the reader directly, commenting of Arthur's badgering, interrogative manner, "Have I mentioned that Arthur is a litigator?" In a couple of the other stories, readers may find it initially difficult to understand the relationships of the main characters who are linked in complicated ways, though this may have been a stylistic choice of Felsenfeld's—and clarification is always in the offing.

With most stories taking place on the Upper West Side (where Felsenfeld lives part-time) and in Riverdale—perhaps this qualifies as the upper, upper, upper West side—Blaustein's Kiss is a fine addition to the canon of Upper West Side literature and is well worth a look.

Blaustein's Kiss is published by Epigraph Books.

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Nancy Novick blogs about the literary life of the Upper West Side at westsidewords.com.

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