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Look: Poems



Synopsis

Daily I sit with the language they've made of our language to NEUTRALIZE the CAPABILITY of LOW DOLLAR VALUE ITEMS like you. You are what is referred to as a "CASUALTY."--from "Personal Effects" Solmaz Sharif's astonishing first book, *Look*, asks us to see the ongoing costs of war as the unbearable loss of human lives and also the insidious abuses against our everyday speech. In this virtuosic array of poems, lists, shards, and sequences, Sharif assembles her family's and her own fragmented narratives in the aftermath of warfare. Those repercussions echo into the present day, in the grief for those killed in America's invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and in the discrimination endured at the checkpoints of daily encounter. At the same time, these poems point to the ways violence is conducted against our language. Throughout this collection are words and phrases lifted from the Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms; in their seamless inclusion, Sharif exposes the devastating euphemisms deployed to sterilize the language, control its effects, and sway our collective resolve. But Sharif refuses to accept this terminology as given, and instead turns it back on its perpetrators. "Let it matter what we call a thing," she writes. "Let me look at you."

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Customer Reviews

In Jonathan Schell's *The Military Half*, he discusses how the U.S. army used language to dampen the awful violence they were inflicting on Vietnamese civilians. "Hootch" was slang for a Vietnamese house. The more proper military term for a Vietnamese person's home was a "structure." It's fun to burn a hootch; a duty to bomb a structure; unbearable to destroy someone's home. The language desensitized the soldiers, so that

they could joke about killing children, pregnant women, and the disabled and elderly without facing reality. My point is that our military's issue with language goes way back. Words matter – these layers of euphemisms make way for real violence that harms real people. Solmaz Sharif offers a creative way to think about the effect that language has. She takes the words out of the perpetrators' mouths and flings them back; she carves those words open and exposes the awful truths that lie inside. In *Inspiration Point*, Berkeley, she starts with, "Consider Kissinger: / the honorary Globetrotter / of Harlem who spins on fingertip / the world as balloon, the buffoon / erected and be-plaqueted here | We honor a man with the blood of millions on his hands, and she compares this ingeniously to how the conquistadors dropped / armored mission after armored mission after saints - / Luis Obispo, Francisco, etc. Later in *Dependers/Immediate Family*, she discusses the violent hypermasculinity that parents instill in their (male) children, preparing them for war from the start, because they've been convinced that's the honorable, patriotic way to raise a kid: "At the WWII Memorial, FDR thanks women / for sacrificing their sons / and their nylons. And later: "Your crib, your teddy bears, / I want to say mother put a GUN / there, blocks and blocks of boys / with pistols in their lunch pails. I have become convinced of the urgent importance of war poetry – of poems that expose or explore meaningful, tangible topics – of poems that offer new lenses through which to view these topics. Solmaz Sharif gives us new tools for thinking about U.S. presence in the Middle East, and what it means when a military can't use words that have direct meaning. I wish this collection had been available to us years ago.

"Until now, now that I've reached my thirties: / All my Muse's poetry has been harmless: / American and diplomatic. It's hard not to hear underpinning this passage, which opens the poem *Desired Appreciation*, the suggestion that for something to be accepted as American it must go along with the current, must uphold the status quo – the exact opposite of how art functions, which is by disruption. And lest there be any misunderstanding, I'll clarify – Solmaz Sharif's *Look* is a book that disrupts, fervently and effectively. The poems within are allergic to complacency and linguistic hypnosis; they constantly reach, inquire, prod, and wonder – sometimes with force – and refuse to allow the reader to be lulled into the sense that everything is okay in the world. The first words of *Look* make the author's intents known in no uncertain terms: "It matters what you call a thing. Unflinching is a term overused when describing writers, particularly poets, but if

there's a book deserving of this phrase, it's Look; Solmaz Sharif is insistent that the reader understand that there is something awry, something lurking below the surface level of today's media and discourse, and she's going after it without hesitation. The poems in Look are interested in challenging the way we hear about and consider war by dismantling the language used when describing or reporting on it. Formally, the poems are concerned with euphemistic language; thematically, they target large-scale complacency with war. When these two tie together is where the book derives its tension and strength (The above is an excerpt from my review of this book at the website The Rumpus; the remainder can be read here:[...])

This is a fantastic book that chronicles personal and public themes surrounding America's wars in the Middle East alongside the Iran-Iraq War and these conflicts' social and historical impact from the perspective of an insightful and experimentally deft Iranian-American poet. Sharif uses the American Department of Defense Dictionary of Military Terms to infuse her poems with language that is both mechanical and musical simultaneously. In the process, she creates a contemporary music that sounds like no other music in poetry today. I can't think of a more original or compelling first book--or second, third, or fourth for that matter. LOOK is formally unique and stands out as one of the finest collections of 2016.

5 stars, 500 stars, the whole of the Milky Way. I've never read a collection so conceptually well executed while so emotionally devastating. These poems are moving, eviscerating; they are lamentations, catalogs of both brutality and intimacy. Like all art that's truly haunted me, these poems made me upset, uncomfortable for what they make me question in my own presumptions and views. Calling a book 'important' feels like such a cliché these days, but this book is.

Powerful doesn't quite cover this debut collection. Sharif gives us necessary poems in innovative, unnerving forms. She shakes us from complacency, looks violence right in the eye.

Fantastic read. Must more emotional than I had expected it would be.

Well-written and emotionally moving.

Exciting!

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