

nether reaches of the dark web. He is a long-retired professor of history, a Holocaust survivor, and a self-confessed Nazi fetishist. He presents the survival of Ewa's diary as "an unexplained mystery" while simultaneously swearing to its authenticity. Brought to Wewelsburg initially because of her strikingly pure Germanic features, Ewa feels herself nonetheless to be "a Polish blot in this neat Aryan stronghold." She conceives a real affection for a forced laborer known as "Prisoner 8," while Himmler, fueled by the aptly named drug Pervitin (an early form of methamphetamine), attempts to force himself upon her.



Some readers will undoubtedly bridle at Ewa's perception of "the drollery of the situation"; others will certainly be chilled when Himmler informs her that she will be "a goddess of bounty within our midst." Those are not the only disquieting moments in this novel. Perhaps most alarming of all is the way Ewa's account breaks off with no explanation in the summer of 1941, while she asks herself what became of her parents, whether they are dead or deported, and as she wonders, too, what will become of herself and of the child that is growing in her womb. For clearly, at that juncture, Ewa's prospects seem very bleak indeed.

Warren Motte
University of Colorado Boulder

GRETCHEN MCCULLOUGH *Shahrazad's Gift*

Seattle. Cune Press. 2024. 198 pages.

WITH A SHARP EYE for detail, Gretchen McCullough's *Shahrazad's Gift* is a short-story collection that delves into Cairo's lively, chaotic daily interactions, capturing residents' richly colorful experiences from diverse backgrounds and lifestyles as they clash and blend. From Batilda, a scissor-throwing Swedish belly dancer, to Vartan, the incompetent Armenian dentist, the stories pulse with the lives of expatriates, tourists, refugees, or locals seen in their most vulnerable states, through dialogue that crackles with life that is at times both absurd and deeply human.

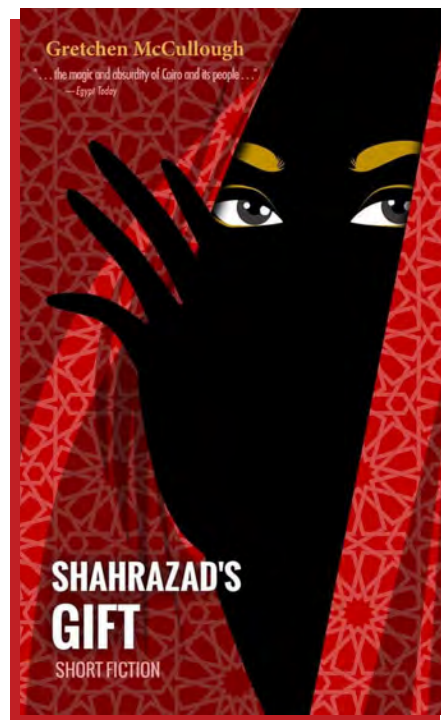
The collection culminates with two stories forming a novella whose quirky, fun characters are so intriguing that they segue into McCullough's debut novel. One such character is the protagonist Gary, an American professor who encapsulates his yearning for Cairo: "I felt myself weakening. I missed the idiosyncrasies of Egypt. The unpredictability and spontaneity of the place."

Having resided in Egypt for over twenty years, McCullough offers a nuanced insider/outsider perspective that pokes fun at Western stereotypes of the region. The 2024 edition by Cune Press adds two significant stories from the initial 2013 release, exploring Egypt's geopolitical complexities. "Ice" portrays the relatively serene life of a Lebanese civil war journalist-turned-teacher, remarking, "This teaching gig was a cakewalk," while "Fatma's New Teeth" examines post-9/11 interpersonal dynamics while critiquing American military expansionism.

From vet visits for diabetic cats to the pervasive smell of garlic mingling with dialogue over Stella beers and vinegary white wine, McCullough's descriptions of food and animals brim with energy and authenticity. While each story stands alone, these elements weave together an interconnected tableau.

Unlike other cities, Cairo compels its inhabitants and visitors to confront their deepest emotions and physical limits. Its

sensory overload—from the cacophony of sounds to the overwhelming visual stimuli—immerses readers in the characters' experiences and highlights how communal solidarity forms in response to the city's challenges, presenting a stark contrast to Western individualism.



"Shahrazad's Gift," the title story, pays tribute to the *Arabian Nights* and its rich oral storytelling tradition, emphasizing the transformative power of narratives. McCullough's blend of humor and social commentary gifts us with a culturally insightful and intensely entertaining collection that not only pays homage to Cairo's charm but also serves as a beacon of narrative prowess, connecting readers worldwide, reaffirming the timeless power of literature to transcend boundaries and enlighten minds.

Sherine Elbanhawey
Montréal

