



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Border of Truth* by Victoria Redel

Review by: Rebecca Johns

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resonates with the reader. When all is finally said and done, our aging selves contain within them the young men or women we once were.

—Jenny DeBell

The Border of Truth by Victoria Redel, Counterpoint, 2007, \$24.95 cloth, ISBN 9781582433660.

The weight of the Second World War lies heavily upon the characters of Victoria Redel's second novel, *The Border of Truth*, a story of what the present owes to the past. The narrative begins in 1940 with a missive from seventeen-year-old Itzak Lejdel—a passenger on the Portuguese steamship *Quanza*, anchored off the coast of Virginia and not allowed to berth to let off its “undesirable” war refugee passengers, mostly Jews—to none other than Eleanor Roosevelt. In it, he begs the First Lady's assistance for himself and his fellow passengers, who were turned away at their intended destination, Vera Cruz, Mexico, after questions arose about the legitimacy of their visas.

The story then jumps to the present: Manhattan, post-September 11. Sara Leader is beginning the daunting process of translating Walter Benjamin, the influential German critic and philosopher and a translator himself of Baudelaire and Proust. Sara's life is further complicated by her involvement with a musician, who is still married to the woman he left back home in Ecuador, and by the entirely unsentimental decision to adopt a child on her own. The adoption counselors, in asking Sara to write her family history, have unknowingly opened Pandora's box, for Sara's father, Richard, a widower and film buff, has sworn never to speak of the past to his daughter, a request she has so far honored.

It's not giving anything away at this point to say that Itzak and Richard are in fact the same person, and that the history the letters reveal to the reader is the story Richard does not want his daughter to know. In alternating chapters linked by subtle clues—a favorite film star, a porcelain hairpin—the narrative creates a web between Itzak's story and Sara's, keeping the reader always one step ahead of Sara as she begins to circle closer to the truth of why her father won't speak of his past and what happened to her grandmother, Sahra, for whom she is named.

The letters themselves are the most compelling part of the novel. In the precocious voice of a film-obsessed teenager, Itzak reveals how he escaped from Brussels with his parents and the family of his best friend,

Henri Goldenman; how they drove to Paris with a charming, inscrutable couple, finding shelter in barns and crumbling estates; how Itzak's father, Max, who had an almost pathological need to return to Brussels, eventually abandoned them on the road; and how Itzak took charge of his mother to get her out of Paris and to the border with Spain as France fell to the Germans. Yet the letters never devolve into melodrama or sentimentality, because the young Itzak spends equal time on the girls he left behind and his preoccupation with Marie, his traveling companion, as well as his anger at his father for returning to Brussels just as it was being occupied.

In the present, Sara's translation of Walter Benjamin is stalling; she can't quite figure out why Benjamin would have committed suicide when he was not permitted to cross into Spain as he himself was escaping the Germans in 1940. Sara herself is quintessentially American, by turns guilt-ridden at her good fortune at living in peace and prosperity, self-reflective to a fault about her life, her work, and her relationship with her mysterious father: "Was translation always a little about loss? Keeping a text alive? Was translation losing herself in her lost mother?" By coincidence, Sara runs into Henri Goldenman's daughter, Rochelle, in a shop, and their acquaintance sparks further questions about Richard's past. But it is when Sara discovers that her father has been in contact with other *Quanza* passengers—has, in fact, sent artifacts to the *Quanza* museum in Virginia and given lectures on the history of the ship to perfect strangers—that her interest becomes an obsession. She cannot stop until she learns the story her father knows.

Redel's first novel, *Loverboy*, was a meditation on the perils of motherhood, a look inward at the damage done by overwhelming love for a child. In contrast, *The Border of Truth* (inspired by the real-life story of Redel's own father, Irving, who was a passenger on the *Quanza* in 1940) aims its sympathies neatly at Itzak/Richard, and it is Sara's obsession with her father's story that begins to seem unreasonable. Oddly, it is the story Sara does not know and shouldn't learn that drives the narrative, not Sara's quest itself. As she comes closer to adopting a child of her own, a refugee child, a child of war, we begin to understand, even if Sara herself does not, that the past does not always translate, and some borders remain uncrossable.

—Rebecca Johns