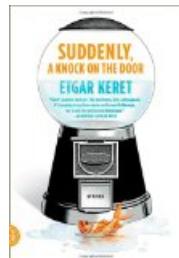


On Suddenly, A Knock on the Door by Etgar Keret

Jane Rose Porter

New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2012. 208 pages. \$14.00.

(Click on cover image to purchase)



"There's a theory that says there are billions of other universes, parallel to the one we live in, and that each of them is slightly different," the first-person narrator of Etgar Keret's short story "Parallel Universes" begins. One can read this theory as a modus operandi across Keret's sixth and newest collection of short stories, *Suddenly, A Knock on the Door*. From story to story, Keret places his characters in iterations of the same worlds—stifling apartments, airplanes, and cars to name a few—subverting these otherwise conventional tropes and settings with absurd circumstances. The narrator of "Parallel Universes" perhaps best describes these wildly varied scenarios:

There are the ones where you were never born, and the ones where you wouldn't want to be born. There are some parallel universes where I'm having sex with a horse, and ones where I won the lottery. There are universes where I'm lying on the bedroom floor, slowly bleeding to death, and universes where I've been elected president, by a landslide. (153)

Keret's stories are terse and fast-paced, moving swiftly through such worlds. The experience of reading them is equal parts disorienting, fascinating, frustrating, and entertaining. There's a certain pleasure in witnessing just how imaginative he can get within the same confined space. In "Mystique," a man on a plane sits next to a stranger who says all the lines he is about to say three seconds before him. In "Upgrade," a man on a plane chatters endlessly to his neighbor about once kissing another man. In "Guava," a man on a plane wishes for world peace moments before the plane crashes and he is reincarnated as a guava on a tree. This repetitiveness isn't boring, but rather acts as a stabilizing factor across Keret's otherwise roving stories.

While other Israeli writers such as David Grossman and Amos Oz grapple with Jewish history and the state of Israel in their work, Keret's stories are preoccupied predominantly with the absurdity of the universal human condition. As his narrator in the namesake story, "Suddenly a Knock on the Door," which opens the collection, states: "The man decides to write a story about the situation. Not the political situation and not the social situation either. He decides to write a story about the human situation, the human condition."

Keret's stories are full of dramatic action—characters commit suicide, kill children, murder their wives, and beat strangers to death—yet these details are almost always left off the page, brought up in passing, using unadorned prose—a stylistic choice that underscores their absurdity. Take, for example, "Bitch," in which a man on a train locks eyes with an old woman's poodle, channeling his dead wife. At first we are lead to believe the man is simply grieving his loss. But then—"The poodle's eyes never left his. 'I know that wardrobe didn't fall on me by accident,' they said. 'I know you pushed it.'" Dark as this territory is, Keret tempers this seriousness with mundane domestic details. "The poodle wagged its stumpy tail. 'But you, you have to take better care of yourself. You've gotten fat, and you smoke too much,'" the murdered-wife-turned-poodle says to her husband.

Keret continuously fine-tunes the degree to which we must suspend our disbelief across the thirty-six stories contained in this collection, which range from twenty pages to one sentence in length. While a handful of stories are grounded in the real and ordinary troubles of domestic life, others spin off into imagined worlds. In "Lieland," a man is sucked into a literal subterranean universe where every lie he has ever invented lives; in "Unzipping," a woman tugs at the zipper under her lover's tongue to discover another man inside; and in "Pick a Color," God is a cripple who wheels himself into church on the disabled ramp.

Being left at the mercy of Keret's imagination can at times be frustrating, particularly in those stories where his risk-taking seems more like pyrotechnics, as in the story "Hemorrhoid," in which a hemorrhoid outgrows the man it's on and takes over his life. Yet when his stories successfully strip away the pretense of reality and drop us into bizarre worlds, lingering in the strange minds of the dead, or invented, or reincarnated, they can be quite powerful. Keret does this using unornamented syntax and wry humor—a mainstay across these stories. Take for example, the aforementioned story, "Guava," in which Shkedi is reincarnated as a guava just after wishing for world peace. Implausible as the storyline is, Keret wastes no time easing us into it:

The new soul had no thoughts. Guavas don't have thoughts. But it had feelings. It felt an overwhelming fear. It was afraid of falling off the tree. Not that it had the words to describe this fear. But if it had, it would have been something like "Oh my God, just don't crash!" And while it was

hanging there, on the tree, petrified, peace began to reign on earth. People beat their swords into plowshares and nuclear reactors soon began to be used for peaceful purposes. But none of this was of any comfort to the guava. Because the tree was tall and the ground seemed distant and painful. Just don't let me drop, the guava shuddered wordlessly, just don't crash. (162)

The result is an exploration of more than just the fear of dying—pointing out the personal hell one can be trapped in, even amidst the improbable circumstance of world peace. The story does something else we see happening repeatedly throughout the collection: it ends where it began—the protagonist suspended high above the earth, petrified of his inevitable destructive descent.

The experience of following along as Keret races through these many absurd scenarios can be disorienting, but his parallel worlds serve as organizing tools that help to hold the collection together. This plays out on the most macro scale with the opening and closing stories of the collection. The circumstances of the first piece in which the writer is forced to tell a story by gunpoint are echoed in the closing story “What Animal Are You?,” in which an also writer-narrator is forced to write a story on demand, this time not with a gun, but a camera pointed at his face. Keret’s connections from story to story are at times subtle, at times explicit, yet finding them becomes one of the greatest pleasures of reading this book.

[Back to top ↑](#)



Jane Rose Porter is a graduate of the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers and has a BA in English from Brown University. Her writing has appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *BusinessWeek Magazine*, *Men's Health*, *Entrepreneur*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. She lives in Brooklyn, New York where she is a freelance journalist, teaches yoga, and is completing her first novel.

Sign up for Our Email Newsletter

GO

THE KENYON REVIEW



Finn House
102 W. Wiggin St
Kenyon College
Gambier, OH 43022-9623
Phone: (740) 427-5208
Fax: (740) 427-5417
kenyonreview@kenyon.edu

© The Kenyon Review
All Rights Reserved
[Privacy Policy](#)
[Contact Us](#)

The Kenyon Review is supported in part by The National Endowment for the Arts and the Ohio Arts Council



[Return to top ↑](#)