

Blessed Hands: Stories

Frume Halpern

Yermiyahu Ahron Taub, Translator

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Blessed Hands is an engaging short story collection that's filled with glimpses into the lives of those whose voices are not often heard.

Translated from Yiddish, Frume Halpern's short story collection *Blessed Hands* captures moments in the lives of those on the margins.

These stories focus on those typically relegated to the outskirts of society—immigrants, marginalized people, and people treated as though they're invisible. Their heroes are Black, Jewish, poor, lonely, ill, and forgotten; their lives are lit up by hard work, human connections, memories, and faith. The stories read like interludes—short glimpses into individual lives, strung together into a whole. There are no resolutions or tidy endings for these manual laborers and people who lost countless loved ones, or for the lonely, the struggling, and the sick.

In "Neighbors," the lone Jewish woman in a building of Black tenants forms an unexpected friendship with a neighbor after a mail mishap, and the meaning of faith is explored. "Another Route" details the unrequited fascination of a young man forced to grow up too quickly; it transforms into rage. In "Grandma Reyze Seeks Advice," an elderly woman muses about the hardships life brought, what aging is like, and what she's learned about life and perseverance.

The standout entry "In the Garden of Eden" is about an elderly man who is hit by a car. In the delirium that follows, he thinks he finds himself in the Garden of Eden, mistaking the nurse taking care of him for his beloved daughter Sheyndele, who died at the age of sixteen. When the man's son visits him and finds that his father is unable to speak—indeed, is half-comatose and unaware of life around him—he consents to have the man moved to a general ward. There, the man retreats into himself, spending time in his internal Garden of Eden. The themes of loss and devastation are strong, but there is comfort to be found in knowing the man has an escape.

The character development and arcs of the stories vary widely, though there is some form of suffering in every tale. Many entries exemplify the difficulties that immigrants face. And while the book takes on an oppressive air at times, it is balanced with the entries' evidence of people's grim determination to survive.

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JAIME HERNDON (September 22, 2023)

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