



Heart-work

Roberta Silman

Campden Hill Books

(272pp)

979-898592602-6

Eloquent, nuanced, and containing wry and poignant humor, the short story collection Heart-work illuminates Northeastern lives across the decades.

About intimacy and interconnection, Roberta Silman's short story collection *Heart-work* is centered in Manhattan and the Northeast, from the midcentury onward, and concerns family and personal complexities.

Written between 1980 and 2023, the stories share observational eloquence and nuance, as well as occasional twists of wry and poignant humor. Often centered in New York and New England, the settings range from urban brownstones to quiet suburbs and country homes in the Berkshires. Herein, New York City is a brisk and cultured place, enlivened by museums, restaurants, bookstores, and the histories and memories of its inhabitants.

In "Tightrope," a poet travels from Virginia to Manhattan to care for her ailing former professor. Startled by the city's "caverns of shadow," she cleans out a never-used fireplace in the professor's apartment and orders wood from the building doorman, filling the chilly rooms with flickering heat and the scent of pine cones. In "Mooning After Rembrandt," a theatrical director drifts in and out of affairs, having divorced his "voluptuous scatterbrain" wife and gathered a drawerful of spare keys from other women. A devotee of the iconic Dutch painter Rembrandt, he imagines that the artist is offering him seasoned emotional wisdom, advising him to "stop this absurd running" and seek a more meaningful romantic relationship.

Certain characters recur with general continuity in their development and perspectives. In "Requiem for a Checker," "Touchstone," and elsewhere, Laura and Phil navigate marriage, travel, suburban and rural life, and raising their children and grandchildren. At one point, Laura's father undergoes cancer radiation treatments, his life overwhelmed by an "incoming tide" of hovering doctors and medical procedures. Her father's strong, inquisitive personality is detailed; as a young man in Lithuania, his longing to do more than just "study Talmud and find a wife" led him to immigrate to the United States. In the present, he contemplates past moments and "old debts" and wonders with confused persistence about what will happen to his individual "power"—or "the thing that makes me me"—after he dies.

The stories alternate with ease between men's and women's viewpoints. In "Without Wendy," a toy maker overindulges in ice cream and emotions as he adjusts to his recent marital separation. A widow in "Bed and Breakfast" opens her home to paying guests and finds unexpected companionship until the troubling arrival of COVID-19. Set in the 1950s, "Labyrinth of Love" is voiced by Ethel, who works at a Manhattan magazine after graduating from college. There are numerous ongoing affairs among the magazine's staff, with a "palpable presence" of sex "not unlike the smell of wet wool on the subway." Ethel becomes involved in her own affair, balancing desires for independence and experience with the era's conventional expectations and restrictions. Enticing, immersive, and compact, "Labyrinth of Love" contains enough to start a novel and leaves audiences longing for more.

Subtle and sensuous, the short stories of *Heart-work* form a reflective collection of endings and beginnings, resilience

and hope.

MEG NOLA (August 22, 2024)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book and paid a small fee to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. Foreword Reviews and Clarion Reviews make no guarantee that the publisher will receive a positive review. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.