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Dancing In Odessa: Poems



Synopsis

Winner of the prestigious Tupelo Press Dorset Prize, selected by poet and MacArthur "genius grant" recipient Eleanor Wilner who says, "I'm so happy to have a manuscript that I believe in so powerfully, poetry with such a deep music. I love it." One might spend a lifetime reading books by emerging poets without finding the real thing, the writer who (to paraphrase Emily Dickinson) can take the top of your head off. Kaminsky is the real thing. Impossibly young, this Russian immigrant makes the English language sing with the sheer force of his music, a wondrous irony, as Ilya Kaminsky has been deaf since the age of four. In Odessa itself, "A city famous for its drunk tailors, huge gravestones of rabbis, horse owners and horse thieves, and most of all, for its stuffed and baked fish," Kaminsky dances with the strangest and the most recognizable of our bedfellows in a distinctive and utterly brilliant language, a language so particular and deft that it transcends all of our expectations, and is by turns luminous and universal.

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Customer Reviews

Reviewed by Small Spiral Notebook: It was in 1993 that the family of poet/lawyer Ilya Kaminsky received asylum as political refugees. Kaminsky has never returned to the "city of his childhood"

because the country he left exists only in his imagination. Still, he has documented that life and its memories in his first full-length book, "Dancing In Odessa." Winner of the 2002 Dorset Prize from Tupelo Press, "Dancing In Odessa" is a joyous achievement. Passionate. Compassionate. Daring in its use of imaginative language. Though the work, written in English, has a deep feeling for a life lived in another country, the words transcend to one universal. The book opens with "Author's Prayer," a work that sets the tone for the work. I will praise your madness, and in a language not mine, speak of music that wakes us, music in which we move. For whatever I say is a kind of petition, and the darkest days must I praise. Continuing to speak, the importance of words and language, is predominant in Kaminsky's poems. Perhaps that can be contributed to his early life in the Soviet Union; among other things, his grandfather killed and his grandmother exiled to Siberia. Kaminsky has stated that "family narrative" is not his "thing;" his goal is one of "imaginary memoir," of being a storyteller and so he writes. In "Praise of Laughter," he mentions the need for continuance: all our words, heaps of burning feathers that rise and rise with each retelling. And in the title poem: I retell the story the light etches into my hand: Little book, go to the city without me. One section of the book, *Musica Humana*, is an elegy for Osip Mandelstam, a Russian poet who dared to criticize Joseph Stalin in his work.

Book Review of "Dancing in Odessa" by Ilya Kaminsky Many have spoken in awe when considering Kaminsky's youth. In his mid-twenties, he produced a work that offers a lifetime of thoughts and observations. But it's not Kaminsky's youth we should be in awe with, but instead his ability to extend moments. In "Dancing in Odessa", the reader is not bound to a simpleton's rendering of a town and its peoples. The reader is instead edified with long moments detailing a town's harsh history, artistic revival, and commune with tradition and culture. At the advent of Kaminsky's collection, he writes an author's prayer. Similar to activating the muse, a convention born from myth and spiritual doctrine, Kaminsky informs the reader that these poems and stories are bigger than him, and he wants to do the seminal authors some justice. From Kaminsky's muse, we learn his poetry will not parade own art, but it will subtract and refine from a city's prized oral history. Kaminsky's poems allow readers to walk, with their own legs, through the old-world town of Odessa. His poems concern action and movement, and do not shield the reader from beauty or evil. Odessa is a town with a history of violence, and the poem "Maestro" captures the disruption and despair of a school bombing. "In praise of laughter" reveals the literal rape of a grandmother, and the figurative rape of a town. "Aunt Rose" describes Kaminsky's heroic aunt, and her graceful negotiation of love in these times of pain and horror. Kaminsky's poems reach the reader by way of

poor Russian families who have no other hope than to stick together. He does not disguise private pain, and writes that his grandmother, "understood/loneliness, hid the dead in the earth like partisans" in "Dancing in Odessa".

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