FICTION

Life Is Boring. Lydia Davis's New Book Makes That Fascinating.

In the author's latest collection, "Our Strangers," quotidian situations are stripped down to come alive.

By Chelsea Leu
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OUR STRANGERS: Stories, by Lydia Davis

A Lydia Davis story, as we've come to know it over the course of five decades and seven collections, is a feat of omission. Often no longer than a page, sometimes laid out like poetry, it captures some quotidian situation with nearly all the context stripped out so that, unbound by any definite place or time, it becomes charismatically strange. "How long the shadow is,/coming across the counter,/from this grain of salt," Davis writes in "Late Afternoon," featured in her new collection, "Our Strangers." The image, diminutive and universal, neatly encapsulates the whole endeavor.

And yet, despite the quality of remoteness that permeates all of Davis's work, in "Our Strangers," our present anxieties creep in. The story "Dear Who Gives a C***," which is formatted as a letter to a company that sells recycled toilet paper, mentions an "attitude of brutal indifference that is all too actually pervasive in the times we are living in." One story revolves around an off-putting phone call with "a woman who in the end did not seem like a real woman, or even a real human being." Another, "How He Changed Over Time," charts the decline of an admirable, learned figure — identifiable as Thomas Jefferson — into a closed-off narcissist. More than one story centers on curdled notions of community, and it's easy to read them as small indictments of contemporary culture. One gets the surprising sense that even Davis might not be completely immune to doomscrolling.

"Our Strangers" isn't a polemical book, to be clear, or even one with an identifiable thesis, despite Davis's request that it be sold only through independent booksellers and Bookshop.org, and not on Amazon. Rather than overt argument, what mainly preoccupies Davis is meticulous, almost obsessive observation of other people: passengers on trains, diners at Salzburg restaurants, a woman at a Watertown Price Chopper attempting to recycle shampoo bottles. The book feels, at times, like a compendium of off-kilter folk tales.

But as the collection builds, a quiet statement begins to form: Davis seems to be providing a vision of how we might relate to the people who exist around us, of what an *actual* community might look like. The title story catalogs the narrator's past and present neighbors, and the narrator's friends' neighbors, as well as the tenor of each of those relationships — resentful, friendly, tense, indifferent. Neighbors, by virtue of simple proximity, "become a sort of family together," Davis writes.

There's a sense throughout of the warmth and delightful randomness of these connections. City passers-by help Orthodox Jews adhere to religious strictures; a mother and a racetrack owner meet to work out the details of a wedding; a man delineates the joys of drinking at airport and hotel bars: "People form bonds at these places — but it's not personal." The longest story in the collection, "Pardon the Intrusion," consists entirely of lines that could have been gleaned from a local Facebook group for free stuff. The result is a hilarious portrait of an imagined neighborhood, with its recurring requests for ukuleles and roosters.

As fun as these neighborly fables are, the stories that linger draw their emotional heft from, or capture wry truths about, our closest attachments. In "Marriage Moment of Annoyance" (there are several stories with this title, all excellent), Davis highlights snippy retorts from one partner to another; multiple stories showcase the disorientation of remembering, yet again, that one's parents are dead.

A few stories lose their tautness, particularly the ones that mention the process of their own composition. (“Addie and the Chili,” for example, opens with the line “Years ago, Ellie asked me to write the story of our friend Addie and the chili.”) But even these reveal Davis’s ethic, which is as alert to grammatical constructions as to reality’s specifics.

“I know this isn’t too fascinating, but it’s our life,” a mother writes to her children in the affectionate, meandering “Winter Letter.” Through Davis’s eyes, however, nothing could be more consistently interesting.

Chelsea Leu is a writer and critic whose work has appeared in The Times, The New Yorker, The Atlantic and elsewhere.

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