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Moments in time

Haim Watzman has gathered together 24 of his touching and thought-provoking short stories

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Author Haim Watzman is a master of the tiny moment, the exact point in time that leaves an impression on the future.

In his new short-story collection *Necessary Stories*, Watzman has republished 24 tales of life in Israel and in the Jewish communities of America. These stories were chosen from his *Jerusalem Report* column of the same name, which he's been writing for nearly a decade.

Necessary Stories is an unstructured read. Watzman shuffles back and forth between female narrators and male narrators, between fiction and memory, between Israel and the US, between yesterday and today. The book is dedicated to Watzman's son Niot, who died in a diving accident during his service in the Golani Brigade. Not all the stories are autobiographical, but there are several in which Watzman, his wife, Ilana, and other family members figure prominently.

In his introduction, Watzman writes: "I found myself following the example of the writers I like best, those who challenge their audiences by leaving holes in their stories for readers to fill in."

This was never truer than in "The Dryad." This short story of a middle-aged woman who forces herself to hike part of the Israel Trail with a group of strangers is rich with detail about the trees on the trail, but leaves the narrator's motivation

to join a hike after three decades of a more sedentary life to the reader's imagination.

"Peripheral Vision," set in the waiting room of Terem's late-night emergency medical clinic in Talpiot, portrays Hanan, a secular man, focusing on a cellphone photo of his beautiful girlfriend Yael. Next to him, Hanan becomes aware of a religious man, "a lean and tall man in a black suit and clipped beard with an open book on his lap from which he was reading aloud," and his son. The trio conducts an ordinary conversation, typical of strangers meeting in a public place. The reader is thus unprepared for the satisfying surprise that comes just a few sentences before the end of the story.

Sometimes Watzman writes as himself, but most often, the narrator is a character. There are several recurring themes, including pianos ("Miss Violet's Piano" and "Piano Lesson"), Sephardi culture ("Bananas" and "Inta Omri") and the death of his son Niot ("A Him to him" and "Plane Story").

Most of these stories occur in locations familiar to Israelis – a Terem clinic, on the Israel Trail, in an apartment in Jerusalem, on Mount Herzl, in Holon and in a restaurant "a bit east of the shuk, between Jaffa and Agrippas."

Stories in the collection play with time. "The Devil and Theodor Herzl" fictionalizes a crucial meeting Herzl had with Russian official Vyacheslav Konstantinovich von Plehve in St. Petersburg. The pair met in 1903 to discuss the possibility

of the support of the Russian government for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Watzman succeeds in making his reader appreciate Herzl's gift of verbal sparring.

"Exile, at Home" is a thinly veiled semi-autobiographical story. Watzman writes of Haim, a bereaved father of a fallen soldier. Sitting near his son's grave on Mount Herzl in the month of Elul, Haim meets the third-century talmudic sage Abba bar Zabda, who teaches him about the connection between Sukkot and mourning. Participants in a Birthright group figure prominently in this time-warped tale.

All the stories in the collection are written in a very Jewish idiom. "Possession" is about a Jewish American schoolgirl in Cleveland who channels a dead rabbi. "The Importance of Low Expectations" recounts Watzman's first disorienting days on a yearlong Israel program in 1978.

Perhaps the most moving story is "A Him to him" in which Watzman, inspired by the musical performance of Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, compares what he assumes is the loss Christians feel over the death of Jesus to the loss of his own son.

By definition, short stories require the reader to get emotionally invested in the characters every couple of pages. If you enjoy short stories, *Necessary Stories* is a fine collection, filled with hints and hidden meanings. It's a perfect choice for a Jewish book club whose members can discuss these stories for hours. ■