

Christian, take the crumb that falls from the Jews' table." Averting any choice, Alik compels the rabbi and priest to drink together. Transcending ethnic, religious, economic, and physical boundaries to unite those around him, Alik resembles a bohemian Christ among Russians in exile.

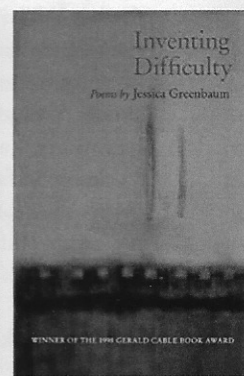
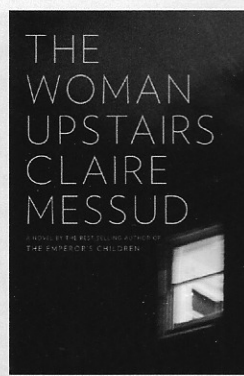
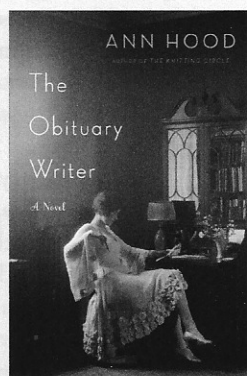
Ulitskaya's *Daniel Stein, Interpreter* (Overlook, \$27.95, translated by Arch Tait) appeared almost a decade after *The Funeral Party*, and is a more elaborate meditation on a similarly universalist protagonist. Daniel Stein is a fictionalized version of Oswald ("Daniel") Rufeisen

(1922-1998), who indeed lived a life worthy of a novel. Obscuring his Polish-Jewish identity, Rufeisen worked as an interpreter for the police in the town of Mir during WWII, and managed to save some 300 Jews from the ghetto liquidation. He was arrested, but escaped to a convent,

What I'm Reading Now (Notes from the Nightstand of Lilith's Book Editor)

I recently stayed up all night reading *The Obituary Writer* by Ann Hood (Norton, \$26.95), a literary novel whose chapters are alternately set in Virginia in 1960, where Claire, a Jackie Kennedy-obsessed young wife and mother finds herself no longer in love with her husband Peter; and in California in 1919, where a successful obituary writer named Vivien cannot overcome the loss of her own lover in the Great San Francisco Earthquake of 1906. Whereas most historical novels that flash back and forth move from present to past, Ann Hood manages to vividly capture two very different epochs. Her writing is rich with period details, from the cans of green beans Claire warms in the evening for her husband's dinners to the competition among her friends to guess the color of the First Lady's dress at the next public event to her creeping sense of boredom and unease: "Looking back on that evening, Claire tried to find the beginnings of a rupture, the way they say the San Andreas fault is already cracked and over time shifts more and more until the earth finally cracks open. But she could never find even a hairline fracture. She remembers feeling satisfaction over the dull predictability of her days. If she did not feel a thrill at the sound of Peter's key in the front door each evening, she did feel a confidence, a rightness, to the way the hours presented themselves." Perhaps the greatest triumph of the novel is that by the time Hood deftly connects the two plot lines in a surprising climax, the reader has already unconsciously grasped that despite living decades and miles apart, women who grieve and seek consolation are all part of a universal narrative.

I also recently read *The Woman Upstairs* by Claire Messud (Knopf, \$25.95), the story of a 37-year-old unmarried elementary school teacher named Nora in Cambridge, Massachusetts who falls in love with the family of one of her students, a Lebanese boy named Reza Shahid whose father is a visiting professor at Harvard and whose glamorous Italian mother enjoys the successful art career that Nora always dreamed of for herself. As Nora becomes close friends with Reza's mother, she re-kindles her own artistic passions, working painstakingly to create a miniature replica of Emily Dickinson's room in Amherst as she struggles with her loneliness despite—or rather because of—her room of one's own. Eventually the Shahid family returns to their home in Paris, but Nora never forgets them; ultimately this is a book about confronting the growing awareness that you may mean nothing to someone who means everything to you, and that in the face of this deeply painful inequity, there is no recourse.



And finally, on my nightstand now is Jessica Greenbaum's newly published poetry collection *The Two Yvones* (Princeton, \$12.95), which takes its invitingly beguiling title from the final poem in which the author confesses to misunderstanding a friend's recommendation that she read a new translation of a Gogol story called "The Two Ivans." Greenbaum finds herself repeatedly the subjects of others' flawed memories, until she begins to think herself "the second Yvonne in the new translation" and wonders, "who are you? You who I thought the star of my story?" This type of self-interrogation and attempt at self-definition permeates the collection; in "Packing Slip," she describes the contents of her self as "White, Jewish female, 5' 4 1/2", 112 lbs., brown eyes, brown hair / from hirsute tribes in Poland and Russia, Tay-Sachs positive, HIV / negative.... fallen arches from thirty years of running the streets of Roslyn / Manhattan, Houston, Brooklyn, and wherever she woke up." Several of these poems allude to Greenbaum's Jewish heritage, including one about a Passover day so warm that the speaker peels off her sweater in a celebration of freedom and a rare instance of self-forgiveness. Written with the narrative simplicity of prose and the emotional honesty of our most private moments, this collection—the first since Greenbaum's debut *Inventing Difficulty* (1998)—spends multiple decades in the author's life as a wife, mother, friend, and reader, reminding me of a comment once made to me by an editor friend: "Poets, if they are men, come out with a new collection every two years; if they are women, it's more like every ten years, because there is all that life that must be lived in between."

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