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THE
DIALOGUES
OF TIME
AND
ENTROPY

[STORIES]

"A radiant new collection...
elegantly written and wise."

—*The Miami Herald*

ARYEH LEV STOLLMAN

Award-winning author of *The Far Euphrates* and *The Illuminated Soul*

THE DIALOGUES OF TIME
AND ENTROPY

Aryeh Lev Stollman

Riverhead Books

New York

These stories, some in slightly different form, were originally published in the following journals and magazines: "Die Grosse Liebe" in *The Yale Review*; "The Creation of Anat," "The Seat of Higher Consciousness," and "The Dialogues of Time and Entropy" in *American Short Fiction*; "The Little Poet" in *Story*; "Mr. Mitochondria" in *Pakt Treger*; "The Adornment of Days" in *Southwest Review*; "Enfleurae" in *Puerto del Sol*; "If I Have Found Favor in Your Eyes" in *Tikkun*; "New Memories" in *The Fiddlehead*.



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"At the intersection of family, faith, and science, Stollman's Jewish protagonists find urgent moral dilemmas. . . . [A] probing, intellectually acute story collection. The stories offer lively conversations and likably self-effacing characters who find themselves in an ethical or spiritual pickle."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"Exquisitely crafted. . . . An expert weaver, Stollman brings together themes of religion, science, and love into an emotional whole."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

Praise for *The Far Euphrates*

WINNER OF A WILBUR AWARD

WINNER OF A LAMBDA LITERARY AWARD

AN AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION NOTABLE BOOK

A *LOS ANGELES TIMES* BOOK REVIEW RECOMMENDED

BOOK OF THE YEAR

A NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE NOTABLE BOOK

"Radiant. . . . remarkable both for Stollman's eloquently understated prose and for the ease with which he constructs his artful plot. . . . At the heart of *The Far Euphrates* lie the vexed questions raised by the Holocaust and its legacy: how we must try to solve for ourselves the riddle of God's existence and cultivate a sense of mercy in an unforgiving age."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

"Affecting."

—*Los Angeles Times*

"Stollman writes beautifully. . . . We finish *The Far Euphrates* confirmed in our belief in the religious—the mystical—power of words."

—Francine Prose, *New York Daily News*

"Given the simple eloquence of its prose, its assured storytelling, and its subtle grasp of Jewish family life and heritage, it's kin to the fiction of the late, great Bernard Malamud."

—*Newsday*

Praise for *The Dialogues of Time and Entropy*

"Stollman's characters struggle not only with the mysterious weight of their emerging sexuality but also with the physical and emotional legacies of the Holocaust. The secrets and lies that attract Stollman's attention are immense tangles of individual lives and family histories: Children come of age in a world uniquely distorted by the recent past, and adults try to hammer out a viable life in a universe that will never entirely forget their suffering."

—*The Washington Post*

"Tales of mystical wonder abound in Stollman's first collection of short stories, which continues the themes of his two award-winning novels, *The Far Euphrates* and *The Illuminated Soul*. Played out here are the competing claims of art, science, and spirituality; the life-changing influence of one person on another; the lingering effects of the Holocaust; the sustaining and confining force of family ties; and the enduring fabric of Jewish culture. These highly charged stories are eminently readable." —*Library Journal*

"[Stollman's] fiction has an allegorical, almost prophetic quality. . . . It's a full, rich, and vulnerable world."

—*BOMB Magazine*

"*The Dialogues of Time and Entropy* is full of substantive, meaty stories, and the best are those in which the narrator gives in to the magic. . . . Despite its roots in Jewish history and geography, *The Dialogues of Time and Entropy* is not really about one particular place or one particular time, because the characters it introduces aren't particularly connected to immediate reality. Instead, in story after story, they try to rise out of their constrictions in time and place. . . . The Holocaust, history, and belief are, of course, ambitious topics, and Stollman deserves recognition for tackling them. He's steeped in Jewish texts and knows his history, and he gets all the details right."

—*The Jerusalem Post*

continued . . .

"We have just met a great writer."

—Jamaica Kincaid

"*The Far Euphrates* . . . in its own appealingly understated way lifts the level of recent American-Jewish writing to a new plane."

—*Forward*

"Lyrical."

—*Time Out New York*

Praise for *The Illuminated Soul*

"A beautiful book about the endurance of the past, the fragility of the present, and the healing power of quiet love."

—Bernhard Schlink, author of *The Reader*

"*The Illuminated Soul* is . . . about the pull of the past over the present and the profound effects that one person can have on another . . . it succeeds beautifully. Stollman's simple but elegiac prose, his deft characterizations, and his knowledge of Jewish lore and history make *The Illuminated Soul* a novel with a big heart and, yes, soul."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Stollman is outrageously talented. . . . Alongside Allegra Goodman, Nathan Englander, Melvin Bukiet, and others, Stollman represents a younger generation of authors who not only embrace their Jewish heritage but interpret the world through its unique lenses."

—*Newsday*

"A wondrous narrative voice that is by turns delicate, patient, searching, and unabashedly spiritual. . . . Stollman's novel—as luminous as the sacred text at its center—will leave an equally lasting impression on the reader."

—*Time Out New York*

"Stollman possesses a lucid writing style that reflects his knowledge of original Hebrew texts as well as other, more esoteric sources. . . . *The Illuminated Soul* is a profound novel . . . but it is also a sturdy narrative that supports a strong and varied cast of characters while . . . staking out that elusive stretch of middle ground between faith and science."

—*The Boston Globe*

continued . . .

"*The Illuminated Soul* itself is dreamlike, taking place in a region of wonder that goes by the name of Windsor, Ontario, but is really a transcendent place, touched by tragedy and foreboding, by clouds and flowers, and prophecies and things unfathomable to the five senses."

—*The Buffalo News*

"A simple, emotionally powerful fable."

—*Forward*

"A beautiful work of art, with much of the earlier novel's wisdom and poetry."

—*The Seattle Times*

"Utterly graceful . . . Stollman is a writer of rare skill, every line molded and sculpted to perfection, and life in a small Canadian Jewish community is well rendered. The sense of loss pervading these Holocaust-stricken pages is almost overwhelming."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"[A] thoughtful, resonant examination of Jewish life in the aftermath of the Holocaust . . . Stollman illuminates the mysteries of life with the clear eye of a scientist and the faith of a believer."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"Seductive."

—*Booklist*

"A rich effort . . . The story depicts Eva as a beautiful muse who left as suddenly as she came. The richness of Torah study, the ancient languages of the Near East, and the opening up of one's soul are some of the gifts that she bestows on the Ivris—and the reader. . . . Highly recommended."

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

For

Henriette Simon Picker

and for

Tobias Picker

AUTHOR'S NOTE

These stories are works of fiction. The events described are imaginary, and the characters are fictitious and not intended to represent specific living persons. When historical persons are referred to by their true names, they are portrayed in entirely fictitious circumstances; the reader should not infer that the events described ever actually happened.

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MR. MITOCHONDRIA



We were having breakfast on the spring day before the locusts arrived. My family lived on the outskirts of Beersheba in one of those large white boxlike structures that bloomed in the sands of the Negev in the fifties and sixties. My parents, emigrants from Canada, had lovingly planted the yard with flowering succulents, brilliant desert varieties that filled their winter-bred souls with wonder and upon which they bestowed allegorical names. Outside the kitchen lay heavy rolls of transparent plastic between the purple pinnacles of Sarah's Handmaiden and the waxy crimson blossoms of Job's Wife. For the last several days, the radio and newspapers were full of terrifying reports on the desert grasshopper, "the largest infestation

of the century," swarming over the Arabian Peninsula to the east, and ready to migrate across the Red Sea.

Adar, nine at the time, had spent several afternoons after school drawing all the plants in his sketchbook "so when they get killed, we can remember them." When he said this, Mother covered her ears with her hands. "Oh, God, please don't be so morbid. They're my special babies! I couldn't bear to lose a single one." Under each meticulous depiction of fleshy trunk, flower, and seed, Adar wrote the species' Latin name. To the side he drew a hovering, glowering figure, six-winged and brandishing a fiery staff—the threatened plant's guardian angel. "See, Tishrei," Adar said, pointing to one of the figures, "they all have curly red hair like you."

That morning, as usual, Father was preoccupied with his whole-grain cereal, weighing exactly 55 grams, 180 calories, of organically grown cracked wheat and bulgur, and measuring exactly 250 milliliters of nonfat milk, 9.2 grams of protein. Father, who had always been perfectly healthy and lean, had recently begun to mistrust the innate brilliance of human physiology. He now stood guard against its errors, discounting the experience of his own well-functioning kidneys in keeping his bodily fluids and electrolytes balanced, or the wisdom of his liver and pancreas to metabolize the varying amounts and types of amino acids and sugars that a normal person might chance to take in from day to day. "Honey, you really ought to try and have more faith," Mother would say. "Faith keeps our atoms from flying apart and has restored us in this wilderness." Father answered with a half-smile, "Kayla, I have faith, but it's not an antidote to reality."

That morning as Adar came into the kitchen, Father put down the graduated cup he used to measure his milk. Adar looked less like a child than like a miniature man, a small, skinny replica of our father with the same smooth black hair and the same pale gray eyes. "Alien eyes," Mother called them, "windows to the alien soul."

"Well, Adar, I had a chance to read your report last night." Father held up the draft of Adar's entry into the National Science Institute's contest for schoolchildren. "It's outstanding. And your research proposal is brilliant. After all, imagination is the secret to all great discoveries. You're going to win." After a long pause Father continued solemnly, "I'm proud of you, Adar. You're a prodigy."

"A prodigy? Where? In my kitchen?" Mother, in a narrow white caftan and sandals, stood by the stove, her red hair tied in a long ponytail. After moving to the desert Mother still practiced the cuisine of her snowy Toronto childhood. Holding a skillet, she flipped a blueberry pancake high into the air, her intense gaze never leaving the revolving spotted disc. "A prodigy? That's quite a heavy label!" Adar was hurt at this implied negation of his new status. He stared at his lap. The pancake completed its brief parabolic flight and landed in the skillet, raw side down, with a faint sizzle.

Mother, eventually, if not instantly, sensitive to the effects of her words, made a clumsy retreat. "Of course, he's prodigiously smart." She slid the pancake onto Adar's dish. "The women of the planet Ichalob are extremely jealous of me"—Mother had been working on her epic trilogy, *The Ichalob Chronicles*—"despite the fact that the mothers are preoccupied, what with all the

upsetting prophecies emanating from their moons, and their children being killed fighting the Uranites. Well, no matter what anyone says, I wouldn't trade in my children for all the particle transformers in Galaxy Five."

Father looked at her, alarmed. "What are you talking about?"

"Talking about? The particle transformers? It's just something I made up."

Father took a long breath, looked at us with his pale gray eyes, the eyes that Adar shared. "What I was trying to say, Kayla, is that you should not dismiss the fact that Adar might be more than *very smart*. The boy has something extra in him. An undeveloped, an *unconventional* genius. I don't know why I overlooked this before. He sees things differently. It should be encouraged."

Mother rolled her eyes, then leaned over Adar. "Why aren't you eating your pancake?"

"I can't. It's made with squished insects. Their purple blood is leaking out."

"You've eaten plenty of blueberries in plenty of pancakes before."

"I'm fasting so the locusts won't come."

Mother took away Adar's plate. "Well, I suppose we should all be fasting as the people of Nineveh did, or Queen Esther when trouble was brewing. God does appreciate a fast, but I have the feeling it's already too late and the locusts will eat everything and you'll be starving to death."



My brother and I were named for the lunar months in which we were born: Tishrei, the autumn month when the world was created and is repeatedly judged, and Adar, the last month of the rainy season, when God is especially gracious to His People, the month before Spring waves her fertile wand across the land.

Adar was clearly very smart, but to be a real live prodigy one had to accomplish some incredible feat at an extremely young, postfetal age. Like the Sage of Vilna, who as an infant recited the correct blessing for milk at his mother's breast. That was a prodigy. Or John Stuart Mill, who read the Greek classics at three. Adar was no John Stuart Mill. He was no little Mozart composing *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*.

Father was a researcher at an experimental nuclear station in the desert. Mother often told the story of their "great migration" from Canada to this faraway and unlikely scientific outpost. While Father was still a postdoctoral fellow in Toronto and already married to Mother, he wrote his first monograph, *Theoretical Deuterium Fusion in Enhanced Magnetic Fields*. Soon after its publication, he was approached by emissaries from the Negev Nuclear Authority, who were scouting the world for new scientific talent.

"They courted your father more persistently and, I might add, more romantically than he courted me. They made extravagant predictions, 'You will help shape the destiny of your people and ensure the survival of their children.' And they

made a wonderful promise, music to any scientist's ears: 'You can do whatever research you want.' They took both of us on a secret trip halfway across the world to see the desert and the facility, to help us think things over. I was still very sad then, and I suddenly felt like I had traveled to another planet. That's when I had my first vision of Ichalob. And I understood even then that despite appearances, Ichalob was not a lifeless world. You know, it had very lush botanical life during its watery epoch that endured into the imperial desert age as well. But anyway it was a good thing that I became so inspired to write my trilogy, because otherwise I would have gone crazy."

Father rarely discussed his work, and when he did, only in the vaguest terms. "I'm working hard on this new project," or, "My experiments are going very well," he might tell Mother on those frequent nights when he came home late. We were led to understand that Father's work was very important and of a secret, restricted nature. Sometimes we were allowed to visit him at the low-rise outer buildings of the research facility. There he had an office filled with bulky computer equipment and large blackboards covered with the endless and incomprehensible chatter of equations. We were never allowed in the domed complex that housed the nuclear reactor. "I'm sorry, I'd like to, but it's not a tourist attraction."

In contrast to the secretive Negev Nuclear Authority, the National Science Institute was open to the public and a source of great pride and prestige to the country. The Institute, with its yearly contest, sought to encourage creative thinking from