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Sofia Samatar, *A Stranger in Olondria*. Easthampton, MA: Small Beer Press. Pp.299. Softcover, \$16.00.

What does it mean to be a stranger? To witness the world through a stranger's eyes? Sofia Samatar's first novel plunges readers into an intricately imagined world to explore these and other questions that arise in our own everyday lives.

The novel is prefaced with a map of the Empire of Olondria, reminiscent of Tolkien's maps of Middle Earth, signaling adventure, journey, and an invitation to a mapped territory, hitherto unknown. In the lower left hand corner of the map is a cluster of seven small islands. The story begins on one of these, in Tyom, a village on the island of Tinimavet.

Jevick, son of a pepper grower in Tyom, will become the stranger in Olondria, the capital city, when he inherits his father's business and must make the journey to market the pepper in the city. The opening paragraph makes clear that this novel will be written in the form of a travel memoir. However, before Jevick introduces us to Olondria through a stranger's eyes, he immerses us into the strange world of his childhood.

Jevick's father, a stern and inscrutable patriarch who is also a shrewd businessman, wants to make sure that his second son is well-equipped to deal with the family fortune. Thus he makes the innovative decision to hire an Olondrian tutor to teach Jevick the

Olondrian language, as well as the art of literacy. This creates the foundation for the novel's love story—of Jevick's passion for the written word. Tyom's culture is an oral one, and its explanations for events are based on local interpretations and beliefs. For instance, human value is based on the possession of *Jut*, an external soul, in the form of a figurine with a unique form and shape. (Samatar's play with invented languages shows the plural form, *Janut*.) Before the annual pepper-trading voyage to Olondria—which Jevick's mother fears as the land of “ghosts”—the household had gathered to pray to his father's god, the Black and White Monkey, for protection.

The intrusion of the technology of the written word into Jevick's world reverses the traditional birth-order hierarchy, for Jevick's elder brother, Jom, is unable to learn or relate in conventional ways: his father has him thrashed, his mother calls him the “son of the wild pig”—a distinction that enables Jom to relate to the natural world in an intimate, if inarticulate, way. When doctors are unable to cure Jom of his learning disability, he is allowed to enact his nature, and Jevick becomes his father's heir. Ironically, Jevick's Olondrian tutor, the pale and pensive Lunre, develops a special fondness for Jom, winning the approval of Jevick's mother, Tiavet, who at first feared Lunre as a strangely dressed ghost. (Samatar's love of language difference shows up again in Lunre's inability to pronounce Jevick—he says *Shevick*, and in Tiavet's inability to pronounce Lunre—she says *Lun-le*.)

Although he falls in love with the book (*vallon*) and develops a burning desire to visit Olondria, Jevick displeases his father in his lack of interest in sports, friends, and typical male activities. His father's abrupt death, however, thrusts him into a position of responsibility, and sends him to Olondria and the novel's cascade of adventures. On the ship to Olondria, Jevick will meet a compelling, but mortally ill young woman whose spirit will entwine with his own, creating his fate and shaping his Olondrian adventures.

Jevick's status is that of a border-crosser: in his own family as well as in his encounter with Olondria, a place he has idealized through its literature. Jevick learns that the Olondrian world of his literary fantasies is far from perfect, but he is irrevocably shaped by his encounters with it. As the book's subtitle suggests—“Being the Complete Memoirs of the Mystic, Jevick, of Tyom”—the spiritual heritage of his origins positions him to become a go-between among many worlds, not only Olondria and Tyom, but also the physical and spirit world, the crippling rationality of the worship of the “Stone” in Olondria and the forbidden realm of the goddess Avelei who traffics in ghosts.

Once grounded in Samatar's Olondrian world, we embark on an adventure of human and supra-human relations that echo our own. Mastery of a new language and customs are part of the pleasure of the voyage. At first, I felt as I did when reading my first Russian novel in translation, overwhelmed by its multiplicity of characters, complicated surnames, and unfamiliar geography. But the investment was well worth the effort. *Olondria's* sequel, *The Winged Histories*, will be published before this review will reach print, and I can hardly wait to read it.

Samatar, a Somali American Mennonite with a B.A. in English and TESOL from Goshen College, and a Ph.D. in African Literature and Languages from the University of Wisconsin, is now an assistant professor of English at California State University at Channel Islands. When Samatar visited Goshen College in January 2016, I learned that she had drafted both this novel and its sequel while on a two-year Mennonite Central Committee assignment in what is now Southern Sudan, where she lived under curfew and without Internet access. During the day she taught English to speakers of other languages, and in the evening she and her husband Keith Miller both wrote novels as a diversion. *A Stranger in Olondria* has the depth and feel of an imagined world created in the enforced leisure of such a place. An award-winning work of fantasy fiction (it won both the World Fantasy Award and the British Fantasy Award for Best Novel), it also has the pace and literary ambition of a nineteenth-century novel. Rife with its conflicts between orality and literacy, and informed by Samatar's own work as the bringer of literacy to members of a once oral culture, it is fraught with questions of modernity. Its craftsmanship has the delicacy and durability of intricate wrought ironwork. In the interstices, it hints at the multiple perspectives of a creative vision forged by one of today's multicultural Mennonite writers.

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