

## Literary Reviews

Sofia Samatar, *The White Mosque: A Memoir*. New York: Catapult Press, 2022. Pp. 336. Hardcover, \$35.

Known mainly for her fantasy novels and science fiction stories, for the past several years the prolific author Sofia Samatar has also been devoting time to the very different project under review here. Built on the framework of Samatar's participation in a group trip to Central Asia that traced the late-nineteenth-century journey of a group of German-speaking Mennonites led by Claas Epp, Jr., from what is now Ukraine, *The White Mosque* becomes a capacious exploration of personal, religious, and ethnic identity. Samatar takes her title from an old photograph of the church in Ak Metchet, the village in what is now Uzbekistan where some Mennonites settled, and sets off on what becomes a multi-layered journey through space, time, history, and memory, with frequent digressions and detours along the way.

Two key dynamics are established early: the "beautiful error" of the Mennonite church in Ak Metchet (which literally means "white mosque") being labelled a mosque, and the gap between those who founded it and Samatar's own lineage (half Somali Muslim, half Swiss-German Mennonite). Haunted by the story, committed to learning everything she can about it, she admits that it is not truly "hers," yet gives herself permission to explore not only the complex story of Epp's band, but numerous related threads and themes that appeal to what she calls her "magpie disposition" (17) and reflect her "mulatta existence" (19).

While the overarching narrative traces the journey more or less chronologically, depicting places and events along the way in detail, the book incorporates copious research on a wide array of related (sometimes barely related) subjects. Sections drawing on several memoirs written by members of Epp's party are especially engrossing. Working from a wealth of material, and feeling no need to tell the "true story" in a clear order, Samatar lifts out the most striking, emotionally charged bits of narrative and quotes. The nineteenth-century pilgrims, who travelled to Asia in belief that Christ would return there, come across in all their human complexity, their moments of suffering, trouble, and success—even while Epp himself remains a shadowy figurehead, not a major focus. Instead, Samatar foregrounds her own emotional investment in these stories. Reading Herman Jantzen's description of the death of two cousins, she

remarks, “Miraculous, to make something happen in another’s body. You write your poor, approximate words in German in 1950, and seventy years later, in English translation, they shift the breath of a woman on a moving bus” (38).

Another major theme has to do with the yearning for “home”—obviously a fraught concept for pilgrims who believed they were journeying toward an apocalyptic destination but found instead only a series of temporary places to settle, some dismal, some more bearable. A popular period novel by Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling, *Das Heimweh*, inspired Epp’s apocalyptic visions, and the “home-ache” or homesickness of its protagonist is echoed in both Epp and Samatar herself, who writes that “certainly Epp suffered from home-ache, from the spiritual pangs Stilling describes in his book” (96).

As Samatar recounts throughout, her own search for “home” is entangled with her sense of marginality as the child of a Muslim Somali tribesman and a Swiss Mennonite mother. Her parents met when her mother was teaching English in a Mennonite mission in Somalia; after they married, her father earned a degree at Goshen College and became a well-respected professor and historian before his untimely death. In *White Mosque*, Samatar reflects repeatedly on being visibly “different” from the American Mennonites she grows up among; she both embraces and struggles with her relation to Mennonites, as church and as ethnicity.

Despite the “memoir” label in the title, however, much of *White Mosque* explores the stories of others. Besides the Epp pilgrims, many of whom eventually resettled in North America, and the tour members and their guides, Samatar devotes serious attention to Konstantin Petrovich von Kaufmann, first governor general of Russian Turkestan; the actress and singer Irene Worth, whose grandmother was on the trek; Ella Maillart, the adventurous Swiss traveler who took the White Mosque photograph; the *Martyrs Mirror*; the Somali-Mennonite poet Mohamud Siad Togane; photographer Wilhelm Penner of the Epp expedition and his Uzbek protégé, Khudaybergen Divanov; Langston Hughes, who travelled in Central Asia after a failed venture to make a Russian movie about the American South; and many others.

Any text this wide-ranging risks losing readers as it shifts among so many subjects and characters, and the lengthy account of Samatar’s high school years at a Mennonite boarding school in eastern Pennsylvania, placed near the end of the book to no very clear purpose, did seem a questionable inclusion to this reviewer. Similarly, one senses the author’s struggle for an “ending”—how to conclude a journey so complicated, a text so full of digressions, side plots, ruminations, one that repeatedly shifts styles as well as subjects?

Generally the risks Samatar takes are more than justified, however, both by the intrinsic interest of her subject matter and by her canny reflections along the way. If she resists “monoculture” and totalizing narratives, her complex, admittedly self-contradictory “magpie disposition” accumulates a good many stories well worth hearing. Moreover, Samatar argues that this very untidiness is to be celebrated, suggesting that the messiness of the contemporary Mennonite church is its strength: “the patchwork of people brought together in such different ways, by birth and faith and thirst, to build a house of effort and care” (292).

Just as the Epp travellers never reached their “final destination,” Samatar comes to accept her own lack of full closure: “And what a joy it is to know you don’t know. . . . To me it means simply that there is always more, that the story is never over. And this, too, is paradise” (297). This recognition of plenitude resonates with her reminders that North American Mennonites are increasingly outnumbered by Mennonites from the developing world. Books like *The White Mosque* may remind such folk of just how many more stories and voices deserve to be heard.

Jeff Gundy  
Bluffton University

David Bergen, *Out of Mind: A Novel*. Fredericton: Goose Lane, 2021. Pp. 195. Softcover, \$22.95.

David Bergen’s latest novel is a small, handsome volume, just the kind of thing its protagonist, Lucille Black, might have tucked into her bag to read on the plane en route to visit her daughter in Thailand and to attend a wedding in France. But its relatively short length belies the depth and breadth of its complex interior.

All is not what it seems in *Out of Mind*. Bergen’s deft prose harnesses the power of the unsaid, as even the title suggests with its implicit *Out of Sight*. Or perhaps a pronoun is implied, as in *Out of Her Mind*. Either reading captures the paradoxical tension that pulls this novel along: Lucille, a psychiatrist, is unable to travel away from “the fabric of her mind” (48), as it is described one sleepless night at a hotel in Thailand, where she has come to rescue her youngest daughter Libby from a commune and a relationship with Shane, its charismatic leader.

This central narrative thread, along with the anticipated wedding in France of Baptiste, Lucille’s former almost-lover, are superbly compelling. Yet Bergen has woven layer upon vivid layer below and