

fiction shorts

Reviews by Siobhan Murphy

The Dictator's Wife by Freya Berry
Headline Review, 412pp; £16.99

The richly imagined fictional country of Yanussia is Freya Berry's setting for her debut novel. Wedged between Romania, Hungary and Serbia, it threw off its communist dictator in 1989, but his wife was not so easy to get rid of.

Marija Popa, "a hypnotic blend of Joan of Arc and Imelda Marcos", was known as the Little Mother of Yanussia, then the Black Widow. In 2018 our narrator, Laura Lazarescu, attends her funeral "to make sure she's dead". However, the meat of the book is set in 1993, when Laura was the junior member of Marija's defence team as the Black Widow faced capital charges of corruption and money laundering.

Sequestered in an eerily empty mansion with Marija and her sister, the lawyers face setback after setback as they work against the ticking clock of the trial date. Few people are being honest — and someone is trying to undermine their case from the inside. Laura is also on a personal mission: to find out what caused her parents to leave Yanussia when Laura was seven and why her mother has seemed to reject her ever since.

Berry loves her gothic flourishes; Laura is forever clutching her throat over some new revelation, the use of insect/spider imagery and predator/prey similes is enthusiastic, and you may well start to feel bashed over the head by how many "secrets" rear up. Yet Marija is a magnificently awful creation, eastern Europe's post-communist woes are convincingly condensed in Yanussia's plight, and the high drama at every turn is good fun.

Good Intentions by Kasim Ali
4th Estate, 352pp; £14.99

Nur and Yasmina are in love and living together in Nottingham. They met at university in Bradford; Nur dreams of becoming a successful writer, "the brown Stephen King", and Yasmina is pursuing a journalism PhD. Life would be peachy — except Nur hasn't told his Brummie Pakistani family about Yasmina because she's black Sudanese and he is terrified of their condemnation.

Kasim Ali boldly grasps the nettle of South Asian prejudice in his debut novel, a story of divided loyalties and the weight of tradition that suggests that panic attack-prone Nur may not be the most reliable of narrators. What lies behind his professed "good intentions" may be uglier than he's prepared to admit. Ali's cast of characters are well drawn, from wise Imran, who has to deal with coming out to his parents, to Nur's boyhood friend Rahat and Yasmina's troubled little sister, Hawa.

Nur's constant foot-in-mouth foul-ups, as he offends everyone in turn, are piquantly cringeworthy. And what a tonic to have a book that takes the topic of race in Britain outside the capital. If only Ali didn't dart quite so much between points on the timeline — it's a good device for slow-drip revelations, but becomes confusing.

Prosopagnosia by Sònia Hernández,
translated by Samuel Rutter
Scribe, 128pp; £12.99

This short, strange story about the slippery nature of truth takes a lot of unpacking, even down to its title (prosopagnosia is the medical term for "face blindness"). Berta is 15 and convinced that she deserves only to

have ugly things in her life. She plays a game with two friends in which they hold their breath and stare in the mirror until their image distorts and they can't recognise themselves or one of them faints.

To get at the truth about reality, she has decided, you must trick your brain into "seeing" past the way we're taught to perceive the world.

Meanwhile, her mother — overweight and recently separated — becomes obsessed with an artist who helped her daughter one day at school. Vicente Rojo, a Spanish Civil War exile, has made his name as a painter in Mexico, and Berta's mother decides to reboot her journalism career and write a feature extolling his genius. Only the painter doesn't seem that keen, and Berta's mother keeps messing up her attempts at interviewing him. And, it's soon clear, nothing about Vicente is quite what it seems.

The swirling oddity of Hernández's tale is destabilising — Berta's mother, our narrator, is as confused as we are as big ideas

collide with unhappy lives. Yet the sense of panicked claustrophobia that creates is strangely fascinating, like watching a slow-motion car crash.

