

BOOKS

WEEKEND

# A dream of renewal

BOOK REVIEW

**My Year of Rest and Relaxation**  
By Otessa Moshfegh. 288 pp. Penguin Press. \$26.

BY VENDELA VIDA

In "Eileen," Otessa Moshfegh's riveting 2015 novel (a Man Booker finalist), a miserable woman in her mid-20s dreams of escaping X-ville, the Massachusetts town where she was raised and where she tended to her dying mother. Eileen spends her evenings pacifying her alcoholic father with bottles of booze, and her days laboring as a secretary at a correctional facility for boys. One day a beautiful woman named Rebecca comes to work at the prison and entangles Eileen in a noirish plot that reveals how wholly original a character Eileen really is. The book is narrated by an older Eileen, who tells the tale of how she succeeded in liberating herself from her past — she's changed her name, both first and last, and has moved to New York, never having returned to X-ville. "Eileen" is the story of how she disappeared.

"My Year of Rest and Relaxation," Moshfegh's darkly comic and ultimately profound new novel, also concerns itself with a miserable woman in her mid-20s seeking "great transformation." This unnamed narrator, however, takes a vastly different approach: She plans to spend a year sleeping. "Sleep felt productive," she tells the reader. "Something was getting sorted out. I knew in my heart — this was, perhaps, the only thing my heart knew back then — that when I'd slept enough, I'd be O.K. I'd be renewed, reborn. I would be a whole new person, every one of my cells regenerated enough times that the old cells were just distant, foggy memories."

The year is 2000, the narrator's parents are both dead, and she lives in an apartment on the Upper East Side in New York that she bought in cash with her inheritance. But she's not dealing with her grief. She sees a psychiatrist, the bizarre Dr. Tuttle, only for the drugs she knows she needs to fulfill her year of sleep. Another doctor might delve into the deaths of her patient's parents and her associations with slumber — we learn that during the narrator's childhood sleeping was one thing she and her mother enjoyed doing together. But Dr. Tuttle is not a good doctor. She has difficulty remembering that her patient's parents have died. During one of their sessions, the



CHLOE SCHEFFE

protagonist finds herself reminding Dr. Tuttle that her mother is dead, that she mixed alcohol with sedatives. "People like your mother," Dr. Tuttle replied, shaking her head, "give psychotropic medication a bad reputation." The doctor then prescribes enough sleep-inducing pills to the narrator to put her, and much of Manhattan, under for the remainder of the millennium.

After being fired from her job at an art gallery for napping in a storage closet during lunchtime and botching a shipment, our protagonist prepares for her year of R & R with the same rigor that others might employ when training for a triathlon. She fills her prescriptions, files for unemployment, arranges for weekly laundry pickup and delivery service, sets up automatic payment on her utilities and purchases an array of used VHS tapes. Soon she's "hitting the pills hard and sleeping all day and all night with two- or three-hour breaks in between."

During these breaks she primarily watches the VHS tapes, preferably anything with Harrison Ford or Whoopi Goldberg. "What do you like so much about Whoopi Goldberg?" her (only) friend, Reva, asks during one of her frequent and unwelcome visits to the apartment. "You need to be watching movies that are going to cheer you up. Like 'Austin Powers.' Or that one with Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant." Reva, a former roommate from college

**"Something was getting sorted out. I knew in my heart ... that when I'd slept enough, I'd be O.K."**

at Columbia, is a bulimic gym rat who reads self-help books (she's also seeking transformation), studies Cosmo and watches "Sex and the City." Reva is jealous of the narrator's beauty and size 2 wardrobe, telling her she looks like a blond Angelina Jolie.

Reva's cinematic tastes may tend toward pop culture, but Moshfegh's novels have the feel of film classics. "Eileen" has the plot twists of a Hitchcock movie, and Moshfegh has said in interviews that she named the beauty in that book Rebecca after Hitchcock's film. In "My Year of Rest and Relaxation," the relationship between Reva and the narrator is reminiscent of Bergman's 1966 film "Persona," in which a stage actress suffers a breakdown and becomes mute. She's tended to by Alma, a garrulous nurse. Reva is as loquacious as Alma, and as fawning toward the novel's couch-ridden narrator as Alma is toward her patient. In "Persona" the two at first seemingly opposite women begin to meld — in an iconic scene their faces mesh; similarly, as Moshfegh's novel progresses, Reva and the narrator, at first strikingly different, increasingly resemble each other.

In an attempt to shed her cocoon (as part of her planned metamorphosis), the narrator gives a gleeful Reva all her clothes and jewelry. "Thank God for Reva," she thinks. "Her greed would unburden me of my own vanity."

The narrator's not the only one who suspects her movie-star appearance may be imprisoning. Trevor, her fellaio-obsessed former boyfriend, says her beauty is her Achilles' heel. "You're too much on the surface. . . It's hard to look past what you look like."

Surfaces are important in "My Year of Rest and Relaxation." The narrator recalls her mother, a vain and distracted bedroom drunk: "I remembered watching her 'put her face on,' as she called it, and wondering if one day I'd be like her, a beautiful fish in a man-made pool, circling and circling, surviving the tedium only because my memory can contain what is imprinted on the last few minutes of my life, constantly forgetting my thoughts." As a younger adult, the narrator harbored dreams of becoming a visual artist, but she believes she's already failed.

"At least I'm making an effort to go after what I want," an exasperated and frightened Reva tells her. "Besides sleeping, what do you want out of life? . . ."

"I wanted to be an artist, but I had no talent," I told her.

"Do you really need talent?" "That might have been the smartest thing Reva ever said to me."

"Yes," I replied.

Having given up her ambitions to create art, the narrator resigns herself to becoming art. In the first days of 2001, she runs into Ping Xi, a success-

ful young artist she knows from her gallery job. He gained notoriety — and an expulsion from art school — for firing a gun in his studio, and has since inexplicably tattooed red zits on his chin. They reach an agreement by which, in a new stage of her sleep experiment, she'll be locked up in her apartment for four months while he films her and paints her and feeds her. He would be the "warden of his hibernation," she says. Their ideas about the project, though, don't align. At the start, Ping Xi wants to film her burning her birth certificate. "I knew what he was thinking," the narrator tells us. "He was imagining how the critics would describe the video. He needed fodder for analysis. But the project was beyond issues of 'identity' and 'society' and 'institutions.' Mine was a quest for a new spirit."

By the end of her self-imprisonment, a transformation does occur. Ping Xi's show, called "Large-Headed Pictures of a Beautiful Woman," opens, and receives mostly positive reviews, but it's not his art that interests her. It's her own desire to be an artist that has been reborn. She finds herself at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in early September 2001, shortly before 9/11, newly awakened to everything joyful and prosaic about the artist's life. Moshfegh's extraordinary prose soars as it captures her character's re-engagement:

"I wanted to see what other people had done with their lives, people who had made art alone, who had stared long and hard at bowls of fruit. . . Did they know that glory was mundane? Did they wish they'd crushed those withered grapes between their fingers and spent their days walking through fields of grass or being in love or confessing their delusions to a priest or starving like the hungry souls they were, begging for alms in the city square with some honesty for once? Maybe they'd lived wrongly. Their greatness might have poisoned them. Did they wonder about things like that? . . . Maybe they understood, in fact, that beauty and meaning had nothing to do with one another. Maybe they lived as real artists knowing all along that there were no pearly gates. Neither creation nor sacrifice could lead a person to heaven."

It's one of the only times she's wondered about the lives of artists she admires, and one of the first times she's truly looked beyond the frame of her television set.

"Step away," a guard reprimands her when she gets too close to a painting.

She does not step back. Instead, she puts her hand out and touches the frame of the painting. Then she places her whole palm on the surface of the canvas. The guard grips her shoulders, but after she explains that she got dizzy, the guard lets her go, and she is free.

Vendela Vida is a founding co-editor of *The Believer* magazine. Her most recent novel is "The Diver's Clothes Lie Empty."

By the Book  
Hanan al-Shaykh



JILLIAN TAMAKI

The author, most recently, of the novel "The Occasional Virgin" avoids reading books longer than 800 pages "unless they are written by my friends."

What books are on your nightstand?

"The Blue Flower," by Penelope Fitzgerald; "Mothering Sunday," by Graham Swift; "Autumn," by Ali Smith; "Seven Types of Atheism," by John Gray; "Al-Mawloudah," by the Egyptian writer Nadia Kamel; "Red Birds," by Mohammed Hanif; "Raising Sparks," by Ariel Kahn.

What was the last great book you read?

"Death in Spring," by Mercè Rodoreda. A rare, haunting novel about a village in Catalan whose brutal traditions are tamed and become a natural part of life, to an extent that even when there is a chance for some of its inhabitants to break away from this fatal violence and escape the power of evil they remain tied to it. But why? Is it because there is no escape from the horror of our world, which feeds on conflicts and violence? I was hypnotized, bewitched by the beauty of the prose ("From time to time snow tumbled from a branch, as though the branch had just taken a deep breath"), although I knew that it was leading me to something sinister but powerful, a realization of the reality of life and death, echoing similar realizations of mine during the Lebanese civil war.

Who are your favorite Lebanese writers? Are there any who aren't as widely translated as they should be?

My favorite Lebanese writers are: Fouad Kanaan, who introduced nihilism and absurdity into Lebanese literature in the late 1940s; Alawiya Sobh, Rashid al-Daif, Hoda Barakat, Layla Baalbaki, Balqis al-Humani. My favorite Arab writers more generally are: Tayeb Salih, Latifa al-Zayyat, Ghassan Kanafani, Mohammad Shukri, Alia Mamdouh, Mahdi Issa al-Saqr, Abd al-Hakim Qasim, Ibrahim Aslan, Mohamed el-Bisatie. I recommend that Mohamed el-Bisatie (Egypt, 1937-2012)

should be more widely translated because he is the poet of the contemporary Arabic novel, with a dozen novels to his name. He takes the Arabic novel to new territories in form, style, theme. He presents his readers with compelling images of ordinary life and offers them memorable characters and experiences. His novels explore the humanity and the noble yet fragile endurance of the marginalized.

What genres do you especially enjoy reading and which do you avoid?

I love to read any genre of fiction except thrillers, books over 800 pages long (unless they are written by my friends), science fiction and silly romances.

What moves you most in a work of literature?

The beauty of the prose, the originality of the theme, the honesty of the writer. I love to feel that I am there in the story, with all my senses engaged, and not just reading about the action, whether I am taken on a fast ride or taken gently by the hand. I look also for strong paths.

What's the best love story you've read?

The story that was written by my stepfather, Muhammad, which I discovered among his papers. It was about a young man who was walking in the hustle and bustle of downtown Beirut in the 1940s when a pair of marble white legs made his heart troubled and he became all eyes, following the pair of legs: "Their whiteness descended from heaven and

swallowed the commotion of the buses, street vendors, movie theaters, the hungry eyes of prostitutes, even the hand which pushed him aside, out of the way of the tram which nearly ran into him. 'Are you blind?' The tram nearly cut you into a hundred pieces.' 'But I am already dead,' my stepfather replied, 'I need the girl with those white legs to revive me.'" Muhammad sent his short story via a go-between to my illiterate mother, guessing that her neighbor would read it to her secretly on the rooftop, as usual. Upon hearing his words, my mother sighed, "It's just like we are both in the movies." She didn't tell the neighbor that eventually she would leave her pious husband, my father, and her two daughters, my sister and me, and marry her lover Muhammad.

If you had to name one book that made you who you are today, what would it be?

"Boredom," by Alberto Moravia. As I was reading it in its Arabic translation in the mid-1960s, I told myself, "So one can write about anything, even about his own boredom, himself, or social alienation." I loved the narrator's tone, as if I was hearing him talking to me, as he was talking to Cecilia. One year later, I started working on my first novel, "Suicide of a Dead Man," about a married man who has existentialist issues, and who falls in love with a 17-year-old girl.

If you could require the president of Lebanon to read one book, what would it be?

My novel "Beirut Blues," in order for him to remember the Lebanese civil war that divided the Lebanese and forced people to flee and live far away from the country where they were born.

And the Lebanese prime minister?

The best book about economics. Still searching!

What do you plan to read next?

"House of Names," by Colm Toibin.

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD

Person / Place / Thing

Edited by Will Shortz

- Across**
- 1 Beguiled
  - 6 Carnival performer
  - 10 Heavy hit
  - 15 Popular self-help website
  - 19 Make a good point?
  - 20 "Three Sisters" sister
  - 21 "The Gold-Bug" author, for short
  - 22 Princess with superpowers
  - 23 Singer / City / Home feature
  - 26 "Safe!, in baseball, or "Safety!," in football
  - 27 Beachgoer's souvenir
  - 28 Leg press target, informally
  - 29 Third-most abundant gas in the atmosphere
  - 30 Emerald or aquamarine
  - 31 "Don't move!"
  - 34 Dog tag?
  - 35 Finished behind
  - 36 Socialite / Resort / Store
  - 41 "Keystone" character of old comedy
  - 42 Sacred symbol of ancient Egypt
  - 43 Word after who, what, when, where, why or how
  - 44 Message in a bottle, maybe
  - 45 Roman orator
  - 48 Gangster tracker
  - 49 How a gangly person might be described
  - 52 Political commentator / Geographical area / Fitness routine
  - 58 World Cup cheer
  - 59 Lots
  - 60 Show extreme instability
  - 61 Algo alternative
  - 63 NPR's "Planet Money" or "How I Built This"
  - 65 Ceiling
  - 66 Related suffix
  - 69 Texter's sign-off
  - 70 "Shoo!"
  - 72 Cheer with beer
  - 74 \_\_\_\_-Magnon man
  - 75 Actor / Transportation hub / Part of a broadcast
  - 81 Holy terror
  - 82 Unwitting accomplice
  - 83 Suisse peak
  - 84 "Young Sheldon" ailer
  - 87 Scott of "Charles in Charge"
  - 88 "With \_\_\_\_ ring . . ."
  - 89 Way cool
  - 91 Comedian / State capital / Record store section
  - 97 "It's a deal!"
  - 98 Some singles
  - 99 Big name in vodka
  - 102 Blockage reliever
  - 103 "Roger that"
  - 105 Upscale hotel chain
  - 107 Father of octuplets on "The Simpsons"
  - 108 Haunted house sound
  - 109 Actress / Midwest area / Crime
  - 113 1960s "It Girl" Sedgwick
  - 114 Longtime "Inside the N.B.A." analyst
  - 115 Primary concern
  - 116 "Speed-the-Plow" playwright
  - 117 RCA competitor
  - 118 Some sports prizes
  - 119 Professor Trelawney in the Harry Potter books, e.g.
  - 120 "Is this really necessary?"
- Down**
- 1 What some Kaplan guides help prep for
  - 2 Dash

**Solution to puzzle of June 30-July 1**

U	S	E	D	F	R	A	S	C	O	S	L	A	B	R	A	N	E	R
N	O	T	A	B	I	G	E	A	L	R	E	N	I	N	E	V	E	R
P	L	A	I	N	G	O	A	C	A	D	S	T	A	G	E	D	O	O
C	O	L	D	A	Y	M	B	A	L	O	G	A	D	I	N			
G	O	J	I	S	P	O	I	L	E	R	H	A	T	H	A			
E	V	A	N	S	E	X	P	O	A	H	E	M	S	N	C	I	S	
D	A	R	K	A	R	T	P	A	R	T	A	Y	A	W	E			
D	A	R	K	A	R	T	P	A	R	T	A	Y	A	W	E			
S	T	O	L	A	I	N	G	O	A	C	A	D	S	T	A	G	E	
N	O	O	T	L	E	T	Z	E	N	H	A	V	A	N	A	N	S	
B	L	O	C	K	E	O	S	T	E	R	W	I	V	E	A	N	A	
C	A	T	T	O	Y	S	T	R	U	T	H	S	E	R	A			
T	M	I																
V	E	N	N	T	R	A	P	S	G	R	A	B	K	N	E	A	D	
E	R	V	I	N	G	H	E	M	I	T	I	C	S	I	Z	E		
U	N	T	A	N	G	L	E	A	R	T	S	T	R	I	N	G	S	
S	T	E	R	O	C	K	O	I	L	P	A	S	S	I	N	G	L	
O	N	O	R	S	O	M	E	I	C	A	N	S	E	E	T	H	A	
B	E	N	E	O	D	E	D	G	E	T	L	I	T	S	A	W	S	

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19					20				21					22			
23					24				25					26			
27					28				29					30			
31			32	33					34					35			
36																	
41																	
45	46	47															
52																	
58																	
63																	
69																	
75																	
84	85	86															
91																	
102																	
108																	
113																	
117																	

PUZZLE BY BRUCE HAIGHT / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ THE NEW YORK TIMES

- 3 Take a few pointers?
- 4 Three-time N.H.L. M.V.P.
- 5 Once named
- 6 Get crazy
- 7 English actor Idris
- 8 "Holy moly!"
- 9 \_\_\_\_ Graham, Meryl Streep's role in 2017's "The Post"
- 10 Crackpot
- 11 "Wait just a sec"
- 12 Many a pageant coif
- 13 Titan, Triton or Titania
- 14 Seat at many a wedding
- 15 "Nothing succeeds like \_\_\_\_": Oscar Wilde
- 16 Warm, cozy spots
- 17 Quite, despite expectations
- 18 Clobbers
- 24 Plenish
- 25 Theme park annoyances
- 30 Barrio grocery
- 32 Perelman, classic Russian science writer
- 33 For
- 34 Lighter igniter
- 35 Zapped, in a way
- 37 Words mouthed on a Jumbotron
- 38 Some girder
- 39 "That's pretty obvious!"
- 40 Fashion monthly
- 45 Take over
- 46 Divvies up
- 47 1960s Haight-Ashbury wear
- 48 Summer swarmer
- 49 Per unit
- 50 Myrna of "Love Crazy"
- 51 Lather
- 53 Obama \_\_\_\_
- 54 Hi or lo follower
- 55 Upscale hotel chain
- 56 Undo
- 57 Hip-hop subgenre
- 62 Add fuel to
- 64 Part of a crane
- 65 Try this!
- 66 What's got ewe covered?
- 67 Flying Solo
- 68 Clerical wear
- 70 Condescending sort
- 71 "The Situation Room" ailer
- 72 Unflappable
- 73 Stand-alone business?
- 76 Kernel
- 77 Like many a kit
- 78 Computer menu option
- 79 Dumas dueler
- 80 Contact, in a way
- 84 Hits the hay
- 85 Major fuss
- 86 Like most light bulbs
- 88 Difficult journeys
- 89 Cubist of note?
- 90 Twit
- 92 Regatta site since 1839
- 93 Slack
- 94 Shines
- 95 Fashion
- 96 Insurance filings
- 100 Ticked off
- 101 All together, in scores
- 103 Food drive collection
- 104 Uriah of "David Copperfield"
- 105 High wind
- 106 Half of a pair
- 109 "The Godfather" mobster who was shot in the eye
- 110 Staples