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Writing with a Retractable Lens Sara K. Eisen

First short-story collections by Joan Leegant and Aryeh Lev Stollman dazzle with their humanity and other-worldliness

"Every novelist wants to write poetry first," wrote Faulkner, "finds he can't and then tries the short story... and, failing at that... take[s] up novel writing." The urgency of the short story form, he seems to imply, demands a mastery of it, so that a character's inner world may be distilled and cross-sectioned before the reader is inevitably, although gently, kicked out after 30 pages or so. Good short stories feel heady and whole, like a weekend romance; bad ones are half-forgotten in the reading, like a tipsy one-night stand.

Joan Leegant's first compilation, "An Hour in Paradise," is most decidedly in the first category. A writing teacher at Harvard, and a winner of numerous awards for her short fiction work, Leegant has a way of penetrating life's desperateness without ever rendering it sad. Hers is a world where no experience is worth undoing, for it always offers some indiscernible remuneration. Hers is a world where the supernatural and the deeply human are one and the same thing.

"An Hour in Paradise" comprises 10 stories along this theme, spanning continents and character types, so that no two stories seem repetitive, although they all fit together in a larger, more spiritual sense. There's a newly religious former drug dealer who, having thought he had discarded a past of hypodermic promiscuity, is shaken up when he's sent by his rebbe to visit an AIDS patient;

four skillfully captured rabbi's daughters running from parental expectations and from themselves -- in vastly different directions; an American student in Israel seeking to penetrate the world of kabbalah in Safed and getting closer than he imagined to the heart of mysticism; and a brilliant portrayal of middle-class guilt in a suburban, middle-aged man with a maddening new Russian immigrant neighbor. All of Leegant's people think and feel intensely, which does not prevent their creator from observing them with great humor and a quick pace.

Leegant's title, from the Mishnaic tractate Ethics of the Fathers, may be a clue as to what she (successfully) tries to do in her stories: "One hour of repentance and good works in this world is worth more than an eternity in Paradise, and one hour of satisfaction in Paradise is worth more than all of life in this world." The paradox is clear -- there is no happiness without the hard work involved in being a decent human being, and yet to be without this burden would be the greatest imaginable bliss.

Writing Jewish-themed short stories long on pathos, humanity and spirituality, she is inevitably compared to Nathan Englander and Allegra Goodman, a not entirely unfounded simile. But there is clearly a new voice here: Leegant works with a retractable lens, letting readers view longing while being able at the same time to take the long view.

Aryeh Lev Stollman is also compared to contemporaries, but his first collection of short stories, "The Dialogues of Time and Entropy," is in a league all its own. His two novels, "The Far Euphrates" and "The Illuminated Soul," won Stollman, a New York neuroradiologist, numerous awards and high acclaim, and this new collection is sure to do the same.

Stollman is what I imagine would emerge in the unlikely event that Stephen King and Cynthia Ozick were to raise a child together; he

is by turns eerie and melancholy, acute in his understanding of the human mind, and vague about whether or not this understanding can ever help one get to the bottom of the human experience. His stories would be outrageous if they did not ring true in their humanity.

Like Leegant, Stollman is intensely and passionately Jewish, and does not shy away from the mystical, nor does he see it as a separate matter from day-to-day life. But his characters all harbor some type of genius, which shapes -- or unshapes -- their humanity. We meet a virtuoso composer who tries to understand martyrdom and compromise as he writes an opera about Shabbtai Zvi; a young religious teacher sacrificing herself to the care of her brain-damaged mother, a formerly brilliant linguist, as her grieving academic father tries to complete his wife's life work; a newly religious teenager struggling with the divorce of his musician parents and his own crush on a rabbi; and a neuroscientist's race against a terrifying dementia, one that seems to have engulfed his life, as well.

Stollman is so vastly knowledgeable about art, music, science, linguistics and religion, one wonders when he has time to practice medicine, or, for that matter, to write. Plumbing the depths of genius ought to be done by someone who is in touch with the phenomenon, which this physician and writer clearly is.

An Hour In Paradise/ Joan Leegant, W.W. Norton 160 pp.; \$23.95, The Dialogues of Time and Entropy/ Aryeh Lev Stollman, Riverhead Books 226 pp.; \$24.95

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