

INTERVIEW OTTESSA MOSHFEGH

'9/11? Talk about performance art...'

Otessa Moshfegh was catapulted to fame by her debut *Eileen*. Now she is back – with the tale of a girl in New York in 2000 who wants to sleep for a year. **Duncan White** finds out why

Herman Melville said that great writers were “thought-divers”, who sought out depths before returning to the surface with “bloodshot eyes”. Otessa Moshfegh, whose novel *Eileen* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2016, certainly dives deep, and in strange waters. She writes about self-loathing, trauma, addiction, sex, perversion, psychoses, and, quite often, about defecation. Her characters drink lots and take drugs but never in ways that lead to them having much fun. Her stories are depraved, profound, and bleakly, wickedly funny. To read her is to be unsettled.

We have met to talk about her new book, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, in Newton, Massachusetts, the town where she grew up. It is a leafy and affluent suburb of Boston, home to the privileged and successful. It seems an odd fit for Moshfegh, who now lives in LA. “I would never want to say anything bad about Newton,” she says. “But I always felt out of place here.” Well, David Lynch grew up in the suburbs, too.

Her family background contributed to her sense of being an outsider. “I guess I had a different perspective growing up with parents who are immigrants,” she says: she is the middle of three children. “I don’t have a history here.” Her father, Farhoud, was born in Arak, Iran, the son of a self-made millionaire who started out as a kid selling cloth in the Jewish ghetto. A gifted violinist, Farhoud trained in Germany and Belgium and met his wife, Dubravka, a fellow violinist from Zagreb, at the Royal Conservatory in Brussels. They settled in Tehran only to flee when the Islamic Revolution broke out. The Khomeini regime targeted families like the Moshfeghs – wealthy, intellectual, Jewish – and so they abandoned everything to start again as music teachers in suburban Massachusetts.

Moshfegh is on the penultimate

leg of the kind of coast-to-coast reading tour reserved for literary rock stars. The readings have come in the wake of rapturous reviews: *The New York Times* called her “superabundantly talented” and *The New Yorker* gave her the full profile treatment. Her story collection, *Homesick for Another World*, published last year, showed the range of her invention. Now *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

confirms her as a major writer. And she’s still only 37. Between sips of iced coffee, Moshfegh gives a precis of the new book. “It’s about a woman in her mid-20s living in Manhattan in the year 2000,” she says. “She’s been disillusioned and disappointed by a lot

in life despite being born into a lot of privilege. In her very early 20s she experienced major trauma and maybe never really dealt with it. She reaches a point when she’s 24 and she wants nothing more to do with life.

“But she hasn’t completely given up, so she sets out on this mission to sleep as much as humanly possible for an entire year. And she does that with the aid of a psychiatrist who prescribes her anything and everything. She hopes that she will wake up renewed and with a totally new perspective.

“She believes that if she can sleep long enough her cells will have regenerated enough times for her to forget her negative past. And she believes the world might actually change with her.”

My Year of Rest and Relaxation is a surreal fairy tale, an acerbic satire, a literary experiment and a psychological novel without ever becoming too much of any one of these things. Moshfegh’s control is masterful and hard-earned. “I write a first sentence and the rest of the book is just revision,” she says. “Every sentence is obsessed over.”

Not that she didn’t have fun. The unnamed narrator is a world-class bitch who delivers a succession of brutal put-downs about her needy friend, Reva, and her ex-boyfriend Trevor. Then there are



‘EVERY SENTENCE IS OBSESSED OVER’
Otessa Moshfegh in Newton, Massachusetts, where she grew up

the artworks Moshfegh invents to mock the art scene of the Nineties (“you know, back when Damien Hirst was still sawing farm animals in half”): there are stuffed dogs with lasers coming out of their eyes, sculptures of monkeys made from pubic hair, and Pollock-style canvases created by methods probably best glossed over in a family newspaper. “I loved coming up with those! It was hilarious.”

From early on in the novel, we realise that a clock is ticking. It is set in New York City in the year 2000. Moshfegh was a student at Barnard College on the Upper West Side at the time of the Twin Towers attacks in 2001. “I heard what had happened over the radio and there was a TV in the lobby of my building so I watched it there. You could see smoke from where we were. Since that day I have watched tons of footage. This sounds really un-American but talk about performance art. Completely disturbing, mind-blowing imagery on our televisions. It

‘Literature matters in America but the British are fanatical. It was shocking’

totally obsessed people and left them vulnerable. I don’t think we have come to terms with what happened. After 9/11, s--- changed.”

Soon after graduating, Moshfegh moved to Wuhan, China, teaching English by day and working at a punk bar at night. It was a difficult time: she was drinking heavily and struggling with eating disorders. On returning to New York, at the age of 24, she landed a job as an assistant to Jean Stein, a member of Manhattan’s literary aristocracy who would go on to nurture Moshfegh’s talent. After being attacked by a stray cat, Moshfegh suffered numbness and forgetfulness and, on being diagnosed with cat scratch fever, was forced to quit her job for bed rest.

It was a chance to become serious about her writing. She studied for an MFA at Brown University and then won a writing fellowship at Stanford. She worked with ferocious and consuming determination. “I f---ing love writing,” she says. “I don’t know if other people love it as much as I do. If you do, you are not going to sacrifice anything for it.” In 2014 she published *McGlue*, a novella about a 19th-century sailor who awakes from a drunken blackout wondering if he has killed his gay lover. The following year she published *Eileen*.

Being shortlisted for the Booker

Prize took her by surprise. “It was kind of nuts,” she says. “I understood that it was a major literary award but I didn’t understand that when I went to England people were going to be buying 12 copies of my book at a time. Literature is important in the United States, but people aren’t fanatical like that. It was shocking.”

Did she think about winning it? “I thought about it a lot. I think I knew I wouldn’t win but I still read all the other shortlisted books. I hope to be invited back one day, just to revisit the weirdness and intensity.”

In some ways Moshfegh is like her writing: serious, even intense, but also self-aware and funny. There is an uncompromising honesty about her that can result in her coming across the wrong way. “I’m sure a lot of people think I’m an asshole,” she says. In some of her promotional interviews for *Eileen*, she was presented as arrogant and cynical. Reading them made her feel “naive” and “used”. “It taught me a couple of things about myself. I need to be careful. But it also taught me I am more uncomfortable being dishonest and careful than I am being honest.”

Some critics were put off by *Eileen* because they found the repressed protagonist disgusting. That helped motivate *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. “When I was just sketching out the character a lightbulb went off. What if I actually made her really beautiful, like untouchably perfect looking? And what if I made her white, blue-eyed, blonde? Are they still going to think she’s disgusting? I’ll show them. They didn’t like *Eileen* because they thought she was ugly, but this perfect-looking woman is, psychologically at least, a lot more troubling than *Eileen*.”

My Year of Rest and Relaxation was conceived while Moshfegh was staying with Stein on the Upper East Side. “I watched these incredibly wealthy people walking around and how they conducted themselves and my first instinct is that they must be vapid. But then I thought, how could that be true? They are probably really weird.

To have to fit into a society that is so scripted? You must have a really strange inner monologue. You have to censor so much of your own humanity. So that’s how the character came to be.

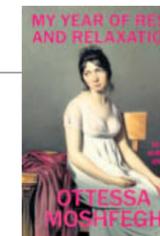
“I had the summer to myself so I went to Paris to write there. I don’t know why. I don’t even like Paris that much. I rented this garret on the ninth floor. And I threw my back out on the very first day. I couldn’t even walk down stairs, so I was stuck in this tiny studio apartment. Of course this would happen. I had just begun a book about a woman who cannot leave her apartment.

“S--- like that happens to me all the time. That whole period became a very difficult time and it informed the writing of the book. Intensely personal, difficult s---. I don’t know if there is a one-to-one correlation with my protagonist, but it was like facing the most

abstract discomfort of my own being.”

Moshfegh has a strong sense that she is fated to write the books that she writes. Anything else is a distraction. She had even sworn off relationships before the novelist Luke Goebel came to interview her for a literary magazine in 2016 and they ended up in bed. They wrote the interview together (it’s worth tracking down) and got engaged soon after. She even allows him to read her work-in-progress. “He’s brilliant. He’s the most fun person I have ever met.”

In May 2017, Stein, 83, jumped from the window of her 15th-floor apartment. Moshfegh told *The New Yorker* she still thinks about Stein every day. In November she also lost her beloved younger brother, who had struggled with drugs. In a piece she wrote a year before his death, she described him as “the brutalised monster inside of my



My Year of Rest and Relaxation is published by Jonathan Cape (£12.99). Call 0844 871 1514 to order a copy for £10.99

heart”. She also began suffering from chronic back pain, a legacy of the scoliosis with which she was diagnosed as a child. “Several discs between my vertebrae are cutting into my spinal cord,” she said. “The MRI was insane.” She is trying to manage the pain but may end up needing surgery.

But the work does not stop. She has adapted *McGlue* into a screenplay and is researching her next novel. “It is the story of a Chinese teenage girl who emigrates to California in drag because it takes place during the Chinese exclusion act when women weren’t allowed to emigrate,” she says. “*Eileen* takes place over a week, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* takes place over a year and this one feels like it will have a much longer trajectory. The challenge interests me: it feels scary and huge.” Moshfegh is getting ready to dive again, to bring another strange story back to the surface from the murky depths.

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