



19 Love Songs
David Levithan
Text, Melbourne, 2020

This collection of short stories and verse is a tribute to love of all stripes: familial, platonic, romantic. Often nostalgic, sometimes sentimental, Levithan's warm and conversational voice is likely to disarm even the most hard-hearted, drawing them into the loving worlds of his carefully observed characters.

Throughout this collection, Levithan often makes it unclear (and therefore pointedly irrelevant) what the gender or sexuality of his characters are. What *is* clear, is that his characters are self-created. This is a source of joyful triumph and anxiety for them: defying social norms means 'you risk stepping away from the normal happinesses as well.'

For these characters, the ordinary excitement of new love is thus often shadowed by threat: 'it can be / the yearning to be normal / that spurs the dread.' Sexuality and gender are not the only minefields, with one character having to defy homophobic interpretations of his religion. For him, Judaism 'has always been about acceptance and social justice,' for 'we are all slaves until everyone is free.'

In another story, two friends march against Trump: 'we've had to worry that we're more alone in our anger and sadness than we thought we'd be.' The march shows them that, whilst hate unites some, love is a powerful and unifying form of resistance. This idea seems epitomised by the moment when the marchers look up and spot a sniper. They can't know what the sniper's true purpose is, but they wave anyway: instinctively, the sniper waves back.

In a world that increasingly relishes dehumanisation, division, and anger this collection is both a tonic and a lesson: to gaze upon someone with the compassionate, loving attention that Levithan gazes upon his characters is a humanising act, and a potent antivenom against hatred.

Reviewed by H.C. Gildfind (hcgildfind.com)
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