



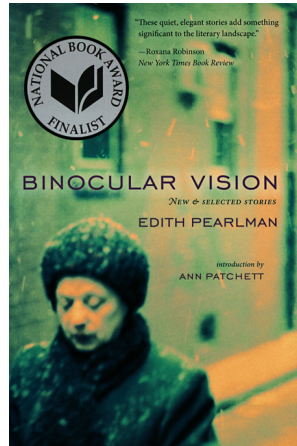
A Change in Perspective

The stories of Edith Pearlman...what one father learns about autism from his son...reducing stress with Jewish meditation... **by Bonny V. Fetterman**

 **Binocular Vision: New and Selected Stories** by Edith Pearlman

(Lookout Books, 392 pp., paperback \$18.95)

Fiction writer Edith Pearlman came to the attention of a broad readership when she was awarded the PEN/Malamud Award for short story writing in December 2011. In the same year, her third collection, *Binocular Vision*, was selected as a finalist for the National Book Award and featured on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review*. But for



the 75-year-old Brookline-based author, so recently “discovered” by critics and compared to some of America’s finest fiction writers, it was far from a literary debut. She had already spent decades honing her art, publishing her stories, and winning numerous awards. Her “discovery” is actually ours.

There is something refreshingly pure in Pearlman’s stories, in addition to the exquisitely calm and precise storytelling. When facing fateful moments of decision, her characters tend to act with intelligence, integrity, and compassion. Her stories reflect two streams of inspiration: a New Englander’s practical idealism and a Jewish instinct to bless each moment.

In “Day of Awe,” Robert Katz visits his son Lex, a single homosexual social worker who lives and works in a Central American country. Lex is planning to adopt a child with learning disabilities

and take him back to the States. Robert’s visit coincides with Yom Kippur and he spends the day reflecting on how to be a grandfather to this child who will soon be “a Katz, Jaime Katz,” part of his family.

Three WWII-themed stories (“If Love Were All,” “Purim Night,” and “The Coat”) take us from the outbreak of war to its immediate aftermath, as seen through the eyes of Sonya Sofrankovitch, an American woman in her mid-50s. When war breaks out in Europe, she surprises her friends by taking a job working for the Joint Distribution

Committee with Jewish refugees in London; at the war’s end, she signs on for another stint, working to help survivors in a DP camp in West Germany. “Purim Night” takes place at DP Camp Gruenwasser, where Sonya, now co-director, is exhausted and constantly stressed by the shortages of practically everything at the camp. Nevertheless, when the Purim holiday celebration begins, she finds herself awed by the survivors’ eager embrace of a shared moment of optimism.

Other stories explore a variety of modern Jewish encounters. In “Chance,” an American Jewish congregation receives a Czech Torah scroll from an obliterated community. “The Story” describes two sets of in-laws, one Jewish, one not, who meet for an awkward dinner at a restaurant. In “Relic and Type,” an elderly Jewish man in Boston studies Japanese in order to talk to his

grandson in Kyoto and discovers the Japanese teacher is a convert to Judaism.


“Binocular vision” generally means seeing through two eyes and combining images from different angles for depth perception. Many of Pearlman’s characters are able to see themselves through two lenses—how others see them and who they know themselves to be—and choose actions closest to their truest selves.

Following Ezra: What One Father Learned about Gummy, Otters, Autism, and Love from His Extraordinary Son by Tom Fields-Meyer

(New American Library, 256 pp., paperback \$15)

As a former senior writer for *People* magazine, veteran journalist Tom Fields-Meyer has a flair for telling human interest stories. In this memoir, he tells a more personal story—that of Ezra, one of his three sons, who was diagnosed with autism at age three. His account of raising this bright and lovable child whose world he can gradually and only sometimes access is honest, moving, often humorous, and always engaging. While we learn a lot about autism and how autistic individuals experience the world, we never lose sight of Ezra as a unique personality with his own special strengths and ongoing challenges.

When Ezra’s preschool teachers mention behaviors that Tom and his wife, Rabbi Shawn Fields-Meyer, have already noticed, they visit a family therapist who gives them some terrible advice. “You have to let yourself grieve for the child he didn’t turn out to be,” she tells them. “I’m not going to grieve,” Tom immediately responds, deciding instead “to pour love on my son, to celebrate him, to understand, to support him, and to follow his lead.” Over a ten-year

 Books marked with a book icon signify that they have been recommended for discussion groups—including Reform Movement-wide discussion on the “News & Views of Reform Jews” blog—as part of the Union for Reform Judaism’s Jewish adult literacy initiative. Visit rj.org and click on the Books link to see readers’ personal perspectives and to add your own.