

Homeward bound

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"I can't write in a straight line", the character Jin says at the start of Janine Mikosza's debut memoir, **Homesickness**.

A reply comes, "Then I'll translate your words into something less crooked."

In *Homesickness*, Mikosza accompanies herself on a journey to revisit the 14 houses she lived in across her adolescence, to create a stable structure around their difficult memories.

The book opens with an unnamed interviewer eating cake at a cafe with her subject, Jin. Jin is a shortened version of Janine that both women agree to use throughout this meta writing project.

Mikosza temporarily splits and projects herself to gain the perspective necessary to understand the effects of trauma and to believe her own memories. From here, the reader witnesses Mikosza write these versions of herself, not necessarily back together but back towards each other.

Homesickness unfolds like a road trip narrative. Jin and her interviewer move back and forth across the country, sometimes driving long distances, to visit as many of the houses as they can access.

This movement is the vehicle for a long and necessary conversation between the two of them. The houses and their attached memories act as clues and prompts for a relational search within their dialogue.

A deep trauma from Mikosza's childhood has lived on in her body and mind in ways

that have unsettled her and made her distrust everyone, especially herself. By splitting the narrative voice into first and third person, Mikosza constructs a nuanced and tender framework around complex trauma and its recovery.

In *Homesickness*, healing does not move in a straight line but it does progress, quietly beneath the surface, as Mikosza compassionately tests out when to question and when to trust herself.

In the opening chapter, Jin expresses discomfort with the idea of memoir – its narcissism, its capacity to hurt others, its commodification of the self. But across the first-third person divide, Mikosza is able to toss these dilemmas back and forth. We watch these two facets of self discuss the implications of telling her story and we feel the weight of their consideration. Mikosza writes for herself, to herself and about herself, yet amid all this self-direction, by making distinct herself as author and herself as subject, the writing never becomes indulgent.

There's a warm remove to this storytelling. Jin pushes the interviewer's comfort away and invites it back in; she repels questions, then later comes back with the answers in her own time. The magnitude of these waves never vanishes but it lessens. The interviewer coaxes and encourages, is gentle and understanding, and above all else, she believes Jin's memories, even as they mix and change.

Across time the reader is witness to an honest and real

friendship developing between two women.

Along with the written text, Mikosza includes fragmentary imagery and notes recorded across time: a drawing of a plant from her garden, a scan of an old art installation and, most prominently, floor plans, sketched from memory of some of these childhood houses. Despite floor plans being a literal form of drawing, as opposed to a creative rendering, here their connection to memory brings them to life.

Throughout *Homesickness* Mikosza repeats floor plans of the same house as her recollection of it changes and fills. Rooms appear and disappear, or move location. Trees in the yard get closer and farther away. We can give structure to our memories but inevitably the structure will continue to change.

The journey of this book is not so much about putting together the pieces of a puzzle, the right parts in the right places, forcing disorder into submission. Life is chaotic, the effects of trauma can be intense and diffuse, and our memories will always warp and shift behind us. Mikosza allows this chaos to exist as it is. She finds a way to share these memories, fallible and unreliable as they are, with herself, trusting herself as a friend.

There is a moment when Jin hands the interviewer a list written on the back of a chemist receipt. It is a list of things that comforted her as a child, including "Talk to someone else".

"The someone else was me but an imagined me, Jin clarifies. She – that is, I – was the person who cared for me. She was me, but not me at the same time.

"You mean another version of you.

"Yes, she says. Someone stronger who didn't cry when she was hurt, who loved me and listened to me. She talked to me, walked beside me every day."

Watching a genuine relationship develop between these characters, with conflict and intimacy and a gradually encompassing sense of understanding is a beautiful thing.

Mikosza's restraint and control in writing herself like this, her awareness and self-compassion, are remarkable. This is an emotionally moving work that also pushes memoir forward. It asks intriguing questions about what the form can do and be, at the same time as it asks us what we can do and be for ourselves, how we can show up for ourselves both on and off the page.

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HOMESICKNESS

By Janine Mikosza
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