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Madott, Darlene. *Dying Times: A Novel*. Holstein, ON: Exile Editions, 2021. Pp. 113. ISBN 978-1-5509-6949-8 (hardcover) \$29.95.

What strikes the reader most about Darlene Madott's novel, *Dying Times*, is the discovery – within the expected sombre shadows of death and dying, and even as the narrator chronicles the final proscenium curtain descending upon loved ones, hated ones, herself – of an emphatic determination to live. To live and love as honestly and reasonably (to introduce an often-utilized courtroom term) as one can amidst the jaded jumble of one's daily conflicts and aspirations. Sustained by an overabundance of "shtetel wisdom," (3 et passim) of level-headed wit and experience, Jack, the narrator's (and author's) senior partner in the law firm, confronts the impending doom of his own terminal exit by reaffirming and endorsing the inherent significance of life even in the shadow of death: "Living is more important than dying. Dying is just one little part of it", adding that dying is "just a bump in the road" of life (84), thus seeming to defy the very barriers imposed by death on life. There is indeed "so much life" in *Dying Times*, as George Amabile has so aptly noted on the novel's: the back cover. It reminds this reader, albeit in dissimilar ways, of both Dante and Coleridge, the Florentine narrator (and author) journeying through the realm of death in order to grasp what ought to be the true meaning of life, while the English poet's ancient mariner wallows wretchedly in a macabre universe of water only to discover that there's not a drop of it to drink. The very first lines of Madott's novel, characterized by a seemingly raw and darkly tinged stream of writing reminiscent of the best type of *comédie noire* and whose staging on the page will colour both the narrative's caustic rhythm and its wry tone throughout, are a curt, quasi-courtroom, evidenced-based statement on impending death and its almost comedic, deliberately detained, and moribund mode of sustaining and lengthening life: "My mother is dying. My senior law partner, Jack, is dying. Our richest client, Bernie Spurling, is dying – each taking their own sweet time, defying predictions" (1).

A highly skilled and successful litigator for over three decades, battling daily not just in the courtroom but also in the boardrooms of her law firm's old boys' club, Madott imbues her novel with a wittingly warranted legalistic stance and narratorial pattern that is well suited to the raw realism that pervades her literary oeuvre in its various genres and subgenres. Both her ambivalent family history and her professional history are framed so as to appear staged, both intertwined as they are in fragmented narrative sketches

and spoken encounters that bring to mind Beckettian hoped-for-but-never-realized resolutions. But while Didi and Gogo circumambulate lifelessly on the minimalistic scene of the absurd, waiting for a Godotian existential meaninglessness, Madott's characters, in their dying, as they did through their living, do effect resolutions, do impart lessons on living and dying. Their dying is a source of meaning. Just as she absorbs her dying mother's imperatives on living a good life, in *Dying Times*, the narrator also learns great lessons on living and dying from Jack, her senior law partner, the "dying man from whom I'd learned almost everything about life and law. Now I'm learning about dying" (9). Dying, unlike death, implying a living sentient experience, as Jack keeps on illustrating. It is quite instructive to note, in this ambit, how by analyzing the lived experiences of her two main characters, her mother and Jack, and by observing their individual approaches to dying, Madott is able to arrive at a conceptualization and gendering of death and dying.

This novel is, as mentioned, a lucid treatise on the real meaning of life and on the complexity of our human condition, a search for truths that only a consummate practitioner such as Madott can bring to light persuasively, equipped as she is with the proper tools to observe and investigate the evidence at hand. Clearly, the boundaries between the author and the narrator in this fictive autobiography – or, if you like, autobiographical fiction – can be rather subtle, capricious, and protean. The narrative voice may be juxtaposed with the authorial voice, and vice versa; yet, in this purposely and tersely tragicomical interweaving, the reader pleasantly senses that neither voice normally oversteps its bounds, and if at times they do, well, perhaps they are meant to be doing it: "Later, past midnight, Mom's dying, I read the journal, waiting for the undertakers to arrive" (47). Madott utilizes a language that is direct and to the point. Again, her professional life as a skilled and accomplished lawyer comes to the fore. But the novel also engages, felicitously for the reader, in singularly evocative and poetic passages, idyllic frames in which natural landscapes, for instance, are masterfully painted by an experienced and well-inked pen. In addition, Madott deploys in her novel intriguing yet fascinating rhetorical tactics such as oneiric interludes, stories within the master story, and well-crafted techniques of metalanguage, all meant to augment the relevance of a life perpetuating itself and living beyond death in literature. Asked by the dying Jack to assist him in publishing his story for posterity, the "I" narrator (or is it the shifting authorial voice?) seems to want to give the reader a hint as to the metaliterary nature of her own writing: "Jack asked me if I could find a place, once he'd written it down again, to publish

the story. That's what he wanted. The story was the truth. It was fiction but it was the truth, I was astonished. Because it *was* fiction, Jack knew that the story was somehow bigger. This from a man who hated untruth tellers" (57).

It is that good brand of "graveyard humour," as Madott titles one of her novel's frames, that, operating at various layers of meaning in the narrative, keeps the story flowing cohesively in a lucid and rational fashion in this captivating, witty, and often sardonic exploration of decaying bodies and deathly shadows at the edge of the stark frontier. It is a compelling piece of writing that, in examining how one might approach the ultimate human inevitability, poses and proposes a series of questions concerning a potential proper code for death and dying, always vis-à-vis the purview of living, within contemporary postmodern ethics. An absorbing novel of life and death, of family dynamics and work conflicts, of human vices and virtues, of sacrifice and undying love, *Dying Times* is truly a book to cherish and treasure. It is an instructive, compelling, darkly alluring, and mischievously humorous text – an utterly engaging read.

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