

# Bleakness without respite: Atticus Lish's novel *Preparation for the Next Life*

Sandy English  
24 March 2015

*Atticus Lish, Preparation for the Next Life, New York: Tyrant Books, 2014, 417 pp.*

Atticus Lish's lengthy first novel is a love story between an undocumented Chinese immigrant and an American veteran of the Iraq War. Other characters include Asian immigrant restaurant workers and owners, members of a dysfunctional Irish-American family, prostitutes and sociopaths. The action takes place over a few months in New York City, primarily in the borough of Queens, at some point in the past few years.

Critics have lavishly praised *Preparation for the Next Life* and an excerpt from the book recently won the *Paris Review's* Plimpton Prize. Novelist Madison Smartt Bell, writing in the *Nation*, commented, "The wretched of the earth are here among us, for the most part silenced—but with this novel, Lish has given them an unmistakable voice." Dwight Garner of the *New York Times* speaks of the novel's "intricate comprehension of, and deep feeling for, life at the margins."

These are serious overestimates of a work, which, for the most part, gives a flawed and monotonous picture of some of the poorest sections of the working class in New York City, and makes no effort to trace genuine problems of everyday life and thinking to their source in social development.

There are merits to the book. Lish can often capture detail in a revealing way and make clear and rapid transitions in characters' points of view. There is also the fact that he has chosen to write about people who make up a large part of New York's population and go largely unnoticed and unheard from in contemporary American fiction.

But Lish does not do the people he portrays any sort of justice. He has delivered a lopsided and unrelentingly grim and depressing work. The picture is not an accurate or adequately complex one.

The novel opens shortly after Zou Lei, the young

Chinese immigrant, has begun working in restaurants in Connecticut. She is herded along with other immigrants to various third-rate Chinese restaurants, and Lish offers unflattering depictions of customers and coworkers alike.

Zou Lei has traveled from Xinjiang region of Western China. Her mother belongs to the local Turkic-speaking Uighurs and her father is a Han Chinese soldier who can visit only occasionally. Lish has sketched a number of interesting, sometimes appealing, scenes of her growing up, of the poverty the Uighurs and other ethnic minorities, and of the overwhelming presence of the Chinese state.

In Connecticut, she is caught up in a police sweep for undocumented immigrants. The detention center she is put in is a militarized, friendless place, where no one knows what will happen to the imprisoned or how long they will be there.

She is inexplicably and unexpectedly released and moves on to New York City, where she feels she will be more anonymous. She works at a series of poverty-wage jobs and finds herself a rooming house to live in. Her fellow Chinese immigrants are distant to her because she is an ethnic minority from the western provinces.

In New York, she meets Skinner, an Iraq War veteran, who is wandering through the city. The two are attracted to each other because of their devotion to physical fitness. Skinner is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The novel switches its attention back and forth between the pair, and then, toward the middle of the book, the members of an Irish-American family that rents out a basement room to Skinner are introduced.

Zou Lei is the best-drawn and most sympathetic character in the novel. She has energy and optimism and seems resilient despite the misery that surrounds her. But in keeping with the myopia of the work as a whole, she lacks the ambitions—and illusions—that tens of thousands of immigrant workers carry with them every year when they arrive in New York.

Skinner is a shallower, more stereotyped creation. Why has he traveled to New York in the first place? We never understand the reasons or learn much about his past before he enlisted in the military. He tells Zou Lei that he once encountered his father in a public restroom. He seems to be little more than the sum total of traumas accumulated in the Iraq war.

Skinner encounters crudity, coldness and a lack of compassion almost immediately when he arrives in Times Square. At a McDonald's counter, "A skinny female with ragged hair and narrowboned hips waited for him to order jiggling her leg. She rolled her eyes up at the ceiling. Supersize? she asked. Yeah, he said, and wiped his nose."

The novelist relates these actions through the filter of Skinner's consciousness, but it is a view of life that permeates the novel: "Nobody invite you, the woman, said, a wonton hanging from her lip," and "The social worker was an obese blond woman whose facial features were confined in a small area in the center of her face."

Or this: "The back of the store was filled with thrift store clothes in bags. The air smelled heavily of grease. A man she assumed was Mexican was eating fried pork out of a Styrofoam takeout shell. His hair was buzzed down tight all over his head the way they do in the military when they give you white walls, and a darker shadow had been left on the top of his head. He had fat cheeks like Buddha and an exact little mustache. When he lifted his lips, he had a gold tooth." Passages like this, or those that describe in detail the contents of cheap, tawdry stores and malls, fill up dozens, if not hundreds of pages, or at least it seems that way.

This sort of style and approach is effective at conveying one mood, emotional bleakness, and not much else. Is that all there is to life, even in some of the most oppressed portions of the population? Moreover, at a certain point, the ugly and sordid details merge in the reader's mind with the various human figures themselves. The impression inevitably created is that the population is to blame in some fashion for the foul conditions in the city.

The utter lack of social solidarity in the working class, or Lish's conception of the same, is spelled out most explicitly in the portrait of the Murphys, Skinner's landlords. The father is an unforgiving, clichéd Irish drunk, the mother a chain-smoking, sentimental and obese hag ("She heaved herself up in her robe and t-shirt and massive drawstring shorts") and the overweight daughter pretends to practice black magic and lives in a "tight, depressing, spring-loaded silence."

Most miserable of all is the son of the family, Jimmy,

who returns from prison and commits a horrible crime against a prostitute, described in graphic detail. Murder and hopelessness follow him from his prison experiences, which, along with Zou Lei's childhood memories and Skinner's Iraq experiences, form the backstory of the novel.

Lish's presentation of the Iraq War contributes to the generally degraded atmosphere of the novel. In an interview with *Bomb* magazine, Lish commented, "I also saw war as a contaminating force in many very literal ways. In Iraq, the sewage system was nonexistent." In keeping with his general approach, however, he focuses entirely on Skinner's own war crimes and those of members of his unit.

The scenes from Iraq are violent and terrible, and, like the scenes in the US, everything is dominated by a polluted immediacy that neither characters nor the author rise above. Back in the US, no one in the book, least of all Skinner, draws any conclusions about the broader implications of the Iraq War or any other historical event. Skinner tells Zou Lei at one point that "Money, then war," make the world go round, but almost nothing more is said aside from this banality. *Preparation for the Next Life* is remarkable in indicting the oppressed in a city where a corrupt, ruthless and insatiably greedy elite holds sway. Social inequality, which dominates life in New York, does not come in for any notice in *Preparation for the Next Life*. The shortcomings of the oppressed are what obsess the author.

One has no interest in sentimental or idealized pictures of anyone, but Lish's novel is at odds with the finest traditions of truth-telling in American fiction, including depictions of New York's working people of the last century: Grace Paley's short stories, the images of Brooklyn in Gilbert Sorrentino's novels, parts of *Manhattan Transfer* by John Dos Passos, *Call it Sleep* by Henry Roth. Some of the stories in Junot Diaz's *Drown* (set in New Jersey) also come to mind.

Lish is working on another novel, and one can only wish him greater insight.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**