

## Stacey Levine's *Mice 1961* reviewed in the *Washington Post*

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### Review by Lydia Millet

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As I read Stacey Levine's new novel *Mice 1961* — which is not about small, intelligent rodents but about two young sisters and their live-in housekeeper — I laughed aloud many times. It was a startled, delighted laughter produced not by commonplace tricks of humor but something singular to Levine's writing: a brilliant chemistry of alienation and familiarity I've never seen anywhere else.

Cracking open the novel, you may at first feel like a stranger in a strange land. But stick with it, because this is a rich and surprising country of curious hilarity, skewed lighting, awkward pratfalls and ludicrous conversations.

*Mice 1961* is set in South Florida on the eve of the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion, at the height of the Cold War, when a group of Cuban exiles opposed to the Castro regime and covertly, incompetently backed by the U.S. government under John F. Kennedy, attempted a military landing on the island's southwest coast. As readers, we don't glimpse that historical backdrop till late in the game (much as, in real life, official CIA records of the Bay of Pigs fiasco were not declassified until many decades later). Most of the novel's action occurs on a single street in Miami as the neighborhood prepares for, and then participates in, an elaborate potluck bash. With live music!

Eighteen-year-old Mice, whose real name is Ivy, acquired her nickname on an unfortunate maternal whim because of the whiteness of her hair and her shaking eyes. As a person with albinism in a hostile milieu, Mice leads a furtive existence: Made to stay inside by day, she's only permitted out when sunlight is gone. At which point she gets harassed by a gaggle of teenagers making a sport out of verbal abuse.

Mice and her sister, Jody, have a close relationship, affectionate and almost hysterically fraught in the wake of their mother's death. Jody, who is couple of years older than Mice and works as a typist, is single-mindedly intent on protecting her sister and getting her a job. Mice has other goals, such as pursuing her radio-building hobby and daydreaming of freedom.

The novel is narrated by a third woman, Girtle, a self-effacing escapee from an institution who's been taken in by the sisters — albeit with a painful indifference — and permitted to sleep behind their couch in exchange for housekeeping services of uncertain merit. She relates the tale from the vantage point of old age, but inside the remembered time of that

framing device, Girtle is both weirdly perceptive and utterly disregarded — the most abject character in an already abject cast, outdoing even Mice in the wretchedness of her station.

Mice is victimized and insulted, often with a viciousness so stupid it provokes the helpless, half-guilty laughter that is Levine's particular genius. Still, though she's unnecessarily pitied and irrationally feared by a diverse suite of community members — and tormented by the foolish teens — Mice maintains an odd equanimity.

Meanwhile Girtle, our obsessive narrator-floor-sleeper, is so desperate to be part of the sisters' family that bedding down behind their couch doesn't faze her in the least. Indeed, her standards are low: "Then it occurred to me that since I'd begun to live with the sisters, I'd never once been struck — not even close. Warmth rose in me, and I retraced my steps down the alleyway to Jody, happy and appreciative."

In the sprawling party scene that takes up most of the book's real estate, characters are referred to by their vocations, preceded by an excellently disjunct modifier: "the frustrated beatnik," "the widow-notary," "the fed-up librarian," "an offhand philanthropist." In one deliciously evocative phrase, "steamy-pink and warm-appearing as shrimp, the architect's face looked almost proud."

Levine's habit of pairing unlikely adjectives with her nouns, causing semantic stutters in the flow of the text, generates a Brechtian distance that calls attention to language and to the artifice of prose. It's part and parcel of the narrator's repeated references to the girls' life as a "story" and to an elusive character she calls "the story's helper." But these metafictional gestures are modestly, expertly handled. Far from interrupting the suspension of disbelief, they create a droll idiom so seductive it cradles the narrative world rather than breaking it open.

Hints of Cold War anxiety crop up out of the melee of the deranged festivities — a baby alligator named Khrushchev, a girl who allegedly joined the Communist Party only for the singing because, you know, Communists love to sing — but by the time direct references are made to the military action occurring offstage, the farce is almost over. Only when a surprise guest shows up does the Bay of Pigs event come into sharp focus.

Like the incursion itself, which was instantly and humiliatingly rebuffed by Fidel Castro, the neighborhood party is a hiccup in time, a series of fleeting misfires and blundering encounters. Salads are extravagantly dismembered, vivid drinks are concocted and rudely rejected, creepy men trade lecheries on the sidelines as women dance, and a fearsome teenager is unmasked.

Levine, whose short-fiction collection *My Horse and Other Stories* won a PEN Fiction Award, is a gifted performance artist of literary fiction — part French existentialist and part comic bomb-thrower. As the waves from Mice's radios might travel for ages through the vacuum of space, or the arms of some forgotten creature stretch up from the shadows in

the vain hope of a kind embrace, so does this exceptional novel offer itself for our delectation — a tender morsel of rue, a jig of human error.