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Diane Donovan's Bookshelf

The Grammar of Untold Stories: Essays

Lois Ruskai Melina

Shanti Arts LLC

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The essay form is under-utilized, these days, in favor of novels and fiction; but when done correctly, it is every bit as dramatic and compelling as fiction.

Take, for example, the diverse writings in *The Grammar of Untold Stories*. Each essay excels in its subject and reflection. The collection is arranged by theme ('Family', 'Work', etc.) and embeds power and personal insight into every piece.

The title work '*The Grammar of Untold Stories*' offers one such example as it explores Lois Ruskai Melina's journey to Hungary in search of her grandmother's roots, which were so vague, after her death, that Lois had to conduct research in advance just to discover what village her grandmother came from.

As Melina explores her family and heritage, social messages are imparted from these revelations; one of them being the immigrant experience and questions about the family's background: "People often asked me, "What are you?" My father told me it was none of their business. I was to answer: "American." He himself would make what he thought was a joke. "Hawaiian," he'd say, at a time when that, too, meant "not American." When the person inquiring stared back at him, trying to find a Pacific Islander in my father's angular features and olive skin, my father would deliver the punch line: "You know, Ruskai. Like Molokai." Then he'd chuckle. Even as a child, I knew it wasn't funny. I didn't understand until much later that he was deflecting his own embarrassment onto the person who seemed to question whether my father and his family belonged here. I think now of the irony in his choosing the name of an island where lepers were sent."

Each essay weaves into the next, adding more pieces to the bigger jigsaw puzzle of Melina's life and heritage. Each contributes its own stand-alone piece that juxtaposes history with social observation and personal experience, drawing its power from all three: "That summer the university implemented Title IX by stitching together the men's and women's athletic departments in a way that moved all the women's positions into the organizational chart of the men's athletic department, like fingers from one hand slipping into the fingers of another. Each

woman - including the AD - became organizationally subservient to the man who held the comparable title...When I asked the Women's AD why she agreed to it, she said it gave her a seat at the table. I didn't say anything, but I knew it wasn't our table anymore and that power is not located in a seat but in a body with a voice and a chest that whirrs like a sewing machine."

The beauty and precision of the language which stitches together all these seemingly diverse experiences to create a quilt of memory, experience, and social observation makes for a beautiful production.

While literary and memoir readers will be a major audience for this creation, *The Grammar of Untold Stories* will ideally reach beyond literature students into the hearts and minds of readers seeking succinct, hard-hitting, and pointed writings about life, liberty, and the pursuit of quality and insight.

This collection's unified power makes it a highly recommended addition for scholarly to general-interest collections.