

## The Life Before Us (La vie devant soi)

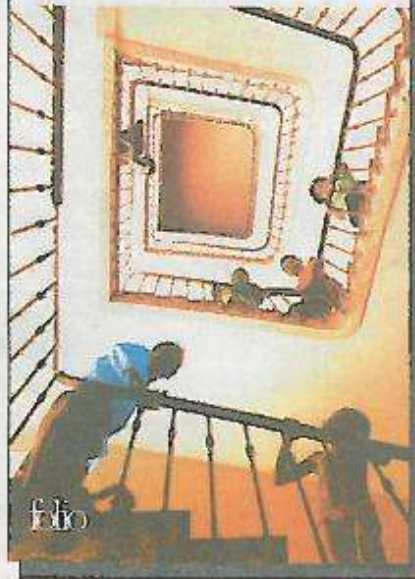
By Romain Gary  
(New Directions)

Many novels have been written about life in the slums, and the overwhelming majority of them fall embarrassingly flat, purely because it's obvious that the bourgeois authors who write them haven't so much as spent five minutes in a ghetto, much less engaged in a meaningful conversation with any of its inhabitants.

But *The Life Before Us* by Romain Gary is a brilliant exception to such pretence. Set in the 1970s slums of Paris, it tells the story of Momo (short for Mohammed), an Arab prostitute's son being raised by a former Polish-Jewish prostitute named Madame Rosa. In this short novel, the world is viewed entirely through Momo's eyes, revealing not only the grotesque (yet to Momo self-understood) consequences of petty crime and extreme poverty, but also the warm relationships that develop between the quarters' inhabitants, who are revealed with neither prejudice nor condescending attempts to make them palatable.

While Momo's central relationship is clearly towards Madame Rosa, he also has close ties with such diverse

Romain Gary (Émile Ajar)  
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characters as Monsieur Hamil, the morally upright Muslim and former carpet salesman; Madame Lola, an ex-boxer turned transvestite from Senegal; and Monsieur Waloumba, a migrant worker from Cameroon who graciously doubles as a witch-doctor.

As Madame Rosa's health deteriorates, Momo becomes the head of the household, aiding his surrogate mother in her fervent wish to die at home, and fending off the father who returns to collect him. As such, the book touches on deeper issues and resolutely places the material over the formal. It is clear that the

man who comes to collect Momo is his father, yet we know that Momo's 'real' parent is Madame Rosa, just as we know that their 'real' benefactors are the drug pushers and pimps who help them in their need.

At the same time, Gary does not neglect to spare a glance at macro-political issues. The compliance of the Vichy regime in having sent Jews, among them a younger Madame Rosa, to Auschwitz is repeatedly underlined, and the Middle East conflict gets a brief nod when Momo tries to keep Rosa out of the dreaded hospital by announcing he has arranged for her relatives to take her to Israel. Dr Katz, the local Jewish doctor taken in by Momo's ruse, remarks poignantly and with great emotion that this is "the first time an Arab has ever sent a Jew to Israel".

Examples of black humour – Momo, for example, is forced to observe Ramadan, not out of respect for his Muslim heritage but because it presents an excellent opportunity for Madame Rosa to save on grocery bills – and the child protagonist's penetrating and off-beat observations are all-pervasive in this book, while the author (who led a fascinating double life of his own) gets the language and dialogue just right, without falling into the familiar trap of making an obscenity out of every other word in an effort to establish street cred.

Macabre but beautiful, *The Life Before Us* is one of the all-time greats.



Photo: Thorsten Metz

Roslyn Fuller is the author of political thriller *ISAK*. More information about the Canadian author, her work and the Irish Writers' Exchange can be found at [www.irishwriters-exchange.com](http://www.irishwriters-exchange.com)