

Things I Didn't Throw Out

A one of a kind meditation on the loss of loved ones

AWARD-WINNING & BESTSELLING BOOK

Marcin Wicha's compact book is in part an autobiographical novel and in part a meditation on the loss of loved ones, on the formation of Polish-Jewish identity and on the complex mechanism of remembering. The narrator of *Things...* goes through objects left behind by his deceased mother. At the same time, using very sparse, carefully calculated words, he creates a profound portrait of a person wounded by history and national prejudices, an ironic and sharp analysis of familial relations, as well as an interesting description of post-war Poland. The mother, the main protagonist of the book, personifies uncontrolled vitality and expressiveness, a permanent state of readiness to fight for one's own opinions, sarcastic resistance to the impact of one's surroundings and, at the same time, feeling the fragility of life, not being rooted in the social fabric and the presence of fear just under the skin. Manifestations of her explosive temperament, dramatisations of everyday life and skilful mixing of irony with directness together not only mask sensitivity, but also proffer a demanding lesson in truthfulness. The mother, the torturer constantly challenging her loved ones, turns out to be an irreplaceable teacher of caution needed in relations with people and with objects.

Marcin
Wicha
Rzeczy,
których
nie
wyrzuciłem

Karakter

For objects carry the memory of people who have passed away. "We won't disappear without a trace. And even when we do, our things will remain, dusty barricades." Books play a special role here because they say most about us and specifically about who we tried to become, to no avail. But other objects also register snippets of human experiences, for example a gold coin which, during the war, could serve as a pass to avoid the Jewish fate.

This elegy on a mother's passing and on the formation of the Polish-Jewish intelligentsia in its entirety is brilliantly written. On one hand there is melancholy, on the other – it is aphoristic, colourful and restrained; it is serious, with a fine sprinkling of invigorating humour. The author uses counterpoint and contradiction with splendid results. He switches between the general and detailed perspective, and interlaces the high nostalgic register with refreshing anecdotes.

This book is similar to numerous records of inherited memory of the 20th century tragic history and at the same time, due to the quality of the writer's eye and style, is one of a kind.

Piotr Śliwiński, translated by Anna Błasiak

My mother adored shopping. In the happiest years of her life she'd set off to the shops every afternoon. "Let's go into town," she'd say.

She and my father would buy small unnecessary objects. Teapots. Penknives. Lamps.

Mechanical pencils. Torches. Inflatable headrests, capacious toiletry bags and various clever gadgets which could be useful when travelling. This was strange, as they never went anywhere.

They would trek halfway across town in search of their favourite kind of tea or a new Martin Amis novel.

They had their favourite bookshops. Favourite toyshops. Favourite repair shops. They struck up friendships with various – always very, very nice – people. The second-hand bookshop lady. The penknife man. The sturgeon man. The lapsang souchong couple. Every purchase was a ritual. They noticed some extraordinary specimen – in a shop with second-hand lamps, where the lamp man held court, a very nice chap, to use my father's jaunty word.

They looked at something. Asked about the price. Decided they couldn't afford it. Went home. Suffered. Sighed. Shook their heads. Promised themselves that once they had money to spare, which should happen soon, they really must...

For the next few days they would talk about the unattainable lamp. They wondered where to put it. They reminded each other it's too expensive. The lamp lived with them. It became a part of the household.

Dad talked about its remarkable features. He sketched it on a napkin (he had an excellent visual memory), pointing out how original certain solutions were. He stressed that the cable had textile insulation, barely worn. He praised the Bakelite switch (I could already see him taking it apart with one of his screwdrivers).

Sometimes they'd go to visit it. Have a look. I suspect it never occurred to them to bargain at the same time. In the end they'd make the purchase.

They were perfect customers. Kind-hearted. Politely interested in new merchandise. Then Dad tried the green Frugo soft drink and had a heart attack in a shopping centre. We had time to joke about it. Even the doctor at the A&E thought it was funny.

A thin trickle was all that was left. The TV remote. The medication box. The vomit bowl.

Things that nobody touches turn matt. They fade. The meanders of a river, swamps, mud.

Drawers full of chargers for old phones, broken pens, shop business cards. Old newspapers. A broken thermometer. A garlic press, a grater, and a, what's it called, we laughed at that word, it featured in recipes so often, a spatula. A spatula.

The objects already knew. They felt they'd be moved soon. Shifted into wrong places.

Touched by strangers' hands. They'd gather dust. They'd smash. Crack. Break at the unfamiliar touch.

Soon nobody will remember what was bought at

the Hungarian centre. Or at the second-hand shop. The regional crafts shop. The antique shop, in times of prosperity. Later, for a good few years, trilingual greeting cards would come, always with a photo of some plated trinket. Eventually this stopped. Maybe the shop owner lost hope of further purchases. Maybe they closed up shop.

Nobody will remember. Nobody will say that this teacup needs to be glued together. That the cable needs to be replaced (where to find another one like this?). Graters, blenders and sieves will turn into rubbish. They'll stay in the estate.

But the objects were getting ready for a fight. They intended to resist. My mother was getting ready for a fight.

"What are you going to do with all this?"

Many people ask this. We won't disappear without a trace. And even when we do, our things will remain, dusty barricades.

Excerpt translated by Marta Dziurosz
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Born 1972

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Selected work

Jak przestałem kochać design, 2015

Marcin Wicha is a graphic designer, author of book covers, posters and graphic signs. His texts and cartoons have been published in various magazines. He has also written several books for children.

Foreign language translations

Czech Republic, Italy, Latvia, Russia, Spain

Selected awards

Polityka' Passport (2018)

Nike Literary Award & Readers' Choice Award (2018)

Gdynia Literary Prize (2018) – nomination

Witold Gombrowicz Literary Prize (2018)