



***Asymmetry*, by Lisa Halliday**
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, May 2019

Lisa Halliday won a Whiting Award for Fiction, which is given annually to outstanding emerging writers, for her debut novel *Asymmetry*. Aptly titled, *Asymmetry* consists of two disparate narratives, which, at first, seem to be unrelated. Each section contains different characters, locales, and situations.

The first section, entitled "Folly," is set in post-9/11 Manhattan. Alice Dodge, a 20something editorial assistant, aspires to become a writer. Reading a book on a park bench one Sunday, Alice encounters Ezra Blazer, a Pulitzer Prize winning author, eating an ice cream cone. He asks Alice about the book she's reading, and they strike up a conversation. They agree to meet at the park on subsequent weekends. Soon their friendship blossoms into a December-May relationship, despite their vast age difference.

The character of acerbic Ezra Blazer closely resembles literary lion Philip Roth. Blazer, like Roth, had a stint in the Army, enjoys watching baseball, and lives quietly on the Upper West Side. (Full disclosure: When Ms. Halliday was in her 20s and working for a literary agency, she had a romantic relationship with Philip Roth.) Similar to Roth, Ezra Blazer is a perennial Nobel Prize runner up.

Alice revels in Ezra's brilliance, and, in Alice, Ezra has found his muse. Increasingly, however, Ezra's health issues abound, and he often calls her late at night to pick up medications. As the "Folly" section concludes, Alice is sitting with Ezra in his hospital room, watching a Yankee game on TV.

"Madness," the novel's second section, veers to another venue. It's now 2008, and Amir Jaafari, an economist living in Los Angeles, is detained in London's Heathrow Airport. An American citizen, Amir is on his way to Iraq to see his older brother Sami. Amir had been born to Iraqi parents on a flight to New York where his father, a hematologist, was to take a position at Cornell Medical College. "We were moving to America," Amir muses, "at a relatively sympathetic time.... I was granted two

passports with two colors and three languages between them, although I didn't a word of Kurdish until I was almost 29."

Despite Amir's American passport, officials at Heathrow are suspicious of him. He is ushered into a holding room where a series of agents interrogate him. To pass the time between questionings, Amir recounts details about his family, lost loves, and, ultimately, the reason why he is on his way to Iraq.

The "Folly" and "Madness" sections of *Asymmetry* are intriguing stand-alone novellas on their own. The key to their connection, however, lies with irascible Ezra. In the novel's short coda, Ezra is interviewed by BBC Radio. What Ezra reveals ties the strands of *Asymmetry* together and prompted this reviewer to read Ms. Halliday's cleverly crafted novel a second time.