

## JESSICA LOUDIS

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Tama Janowitz  
SCREAM

A memoir of glamour and dysfunction  
304pp. Dey Street Books. £18.99.  
978 0 06 239132 1

Nichola Rips  
TRYING TO FLOAT

Coming of age in New York's legendary Chelsea  
Hotel  
304pp. Dey Street Books. £18.99.  
978 0 06 2391332 1

In the mid-1980s, Tama Janowitz became a household name among zeitgeisty New Yorkers for *Slaves of New York*, her breakout collection of stories which doubled as a kind of manual for performance artists, social climbers and other downtown personality types. (Within this creative milieu, Jay McInerney observed, “the name Raphael is more likely to conjure up a drug dealer than the painter.”) Janowitz was lumped with McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis as part of that generation’s “Literary Brat Pack” and put on the cover of *New York* magazine, where she posed in an evening dress next to a meat locker. At the time she lived in that meat locker, and soon she became synonymous with a certain transitional moment in the city’s history, before bankers began ousting artists from SoHo lofts, and when the payoff for bohemian striving could either be bankruptcy or a six-figure book deal. (Unfortunately for Janowitz, her most notable offer was for \$5,000 from Andy Warhol for film rights to *Slaves*.) In the ensuing years, she has published ten books that have largely flopped, and become a favourite target for unsympathetic reviewers and style section writers, who check in periodically about her latest hobby or real estate venture.

*Scream*, Janowitz’s new memoir, revisits some of this early territory, but it focuses mostly on what could be called her second act: life in upstate New York dealing with financial troubles and tending to her daughter and ailing, senile, incontinent mother. Schuylar County, Janowitz’s new rural home, is depicted as a dystopian Hieronymus Bosch landscape strewn with bulk junk food, hunting paraphernalia and unemployed men mowing their lawns. Long sections are devoted to unorthodox pairings in the aisles of the local grocery store (imported beer, powdered drinks, insecticide) and descriptions of her boyfriend, whose affinity for guns and rough sex earn him the status of a blue-collar fetish object. (It is not clear what the deal is with Janowitz’s husband, the former curator of the Warhol estate.) The narrative bounces between the present day and flashbacks to the mid-1960s, when Janowitz’s father – a therapist who was forced to stop practising after sleeping with his patients – split up with her mother, an acclaimed poet who raised two children on a part-time professor’s salary before going on to teach at Cornell University. But times weren’t always bad: the book’s highlights include a section on Israel – where the family lived for a year as part of the country’s efforts to recruit optimistic young Jews – and Janowitz’s recollections of becoming Lawrence Durrell’s mistress (despite a forty-four year age difference), partying at Studio 54, and studying with Elizabeth Hardwick at Barnard University. Whether you find *Scream* amusing depends on what you think of Janow-

itz’s acidic style, which is choppy and harrowing in a Cookie Mueller sort of way. I find Mueller the better option: with Janowitz thin anecdotes are stretched to their limits, and subjects like her mother’s gastrointestinal troubles are played for cheap laughs. Had the author been able to cultivate a sense of investment or pathos, this might have been funny – instead, it comes off as somewhat deranged.

A more charming entry to the good/bad old days of the New York canon is Nicolaia Rips’s *Trying To Float*, an account of the author’s upbringing in the Chelsea Hotel, the storied, scuzzy establishment whose tenants and visitors famously included Sam Shepherd, Janis Joplin, Leonard Cohen, Willem de Kooning, Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen, and no small number of European tourists drawn to its reputation as something of an American Montmartre. (The building was designed by a follower of the French utopian social theorist Charles Fourier, and when it was completed, the construction workers, plumbers and technicians involved were given apartments, setting a precedent for the artists who were later invited to move in.) For more than half a century, the hotel was presided over by Stanley Bard, a second-generation Hungarian who accepted paintings as payment, and would corner tenants in the lobby and scream at them about overdue rent. Rips recalls how one resident routinely hid in laundry carts to avoid attracting his attention, and how crowds of tenants who owed Bard money raced across the lobby and out the door whenever he left for lunch.

Rips was born in 1989, four years after *Slaves* came out, and she lived in the Chelsea with her parents, a model-turned-artist and lawyer-turned-author. *Trying To Float*, her first book, began as a journal in eighth grade, and over the years – and with assistance from her father, whom she affectionately describes as lazy – the project evolved. Dozens of homages to the Chelsea have been written over the years, particularly after Bard was forced out by the hotel’s board of directors in 2007, but to Rips’s credit she doesn’t revisit tired lore or eulogize a time she wasn’t around to experience. Rather, *Trying To Float* is a portrait of the artist as a young oddball, and Rips’s account of her own childhood problems – namely, late literacy and chronic friendlessness – are mediated through the characters she grew up around. Before she had friends her age, she would take rides around the neighbourhood on Johnnie, a black Newfoundland that belonged to El Capitan, a fifty-something man who styled himself as a nineteenth-century pirate. When bullied in middle school, Rips was offered protection by Stormé, an octogenarian cross-dresser who carried a pink revolver and was known for throwing the first punch at the Stonewall riot.

More than a portrait of an eccentric, *Trying To Float* is about braving the various indignities of childhood. Much of the book is given over to classroom drama and misbegotten encounters with Chelsea denizens – such as when a Disney princess-themed dinner party goes awry after El Captain interrupts it in his underwear, spooking a half-dozen elementary school girls. There’s not always enough material to sustain entire chapters (a story culminating in a fart joke takes up several pages) but Rips’s maturity and gift for wordplay enable a little to go a long way, and the result is, if not revelatory, at least entertaining and refreshingly introspective.

It has been a truism for at least the past three decades that New York is “over”, a victim of rapacious developers. Memoirs like James Wolcott’s *Lucking Out*, Richard Hell’s *I Dreamed I Was a Very Clean Tramp* and Patti Smith’s *Just Kids* have documented that bygone era, and ones about our current moment have yet to be written (though recent novels by Choire Sicha and David Shapiro might indicate what they’ll look like). Thankfully, neither *Trying To Float* nor *Scream* are interested in mining that recent past too deeply, instead seeing it as the foundation for whatever comes next. This might mark a shift in the New York nostalgia-industrial complex, or it might suggest that the next chapter of the city’s history will be written elsewhere. Despite her protestations, Janowitz still lives upstate; last autumn, Rips moved to Rhode Island for university. The Chelsea Hotel, meanwhile, is due to reopen next year after a lengthy, and controversial modernization.