

# Otessa Moshfegh: Welcome to the Uncanny [C1]

L'autrice americana di origini croate e iraniane mostra un talento particolare per i personaggi enigmatici e le atmosfere cariche di tensione. Rifugge dalle etichette ed esplora con umorismo il lato oscuro della psiche.

---

Otessa Moshfegh's second novel turned her into the voice of the Millennial generation. Published in 2018, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is set in New York in the months leading up to the 9/11 attacks. Its unnamed protagonist has everything to be happy: she is young, pretty, chic and well-educated, and works at an [upscale](#) art gallery in Manhattan, and has a large inheritance that allows her a comfortable life. However, she lacks motivation and cannot find joy in her privilege, and can only find [solace](#) in sleep. So she embarks on a strange personal project: to sleep as much as possible for one year with the help of prescription drugs that she [stockpiles](#) by lying to her therapist about her insomnia. She hopes that she will wake up in twelve months' time an improved and [well-adjusted](#) person.

## DARK HUMOUR

*My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is a darkly funny [yet](#) misanthropic tale. It [taps into](#) the existential [dread](#) of readers who may [empathise](#) with the lack of [drive](#) of the protagonist and her need to find a meaning in life beyond professional and social status. However, unlike other Millennial writers to whom she has been compared, like Sally Rooney, Moshfegh's stories are set in different historical contexts: her first novel, *Eileen* ([shortlisted](#) for the 2015 Booker Prize and adapted into a film starring Anne Hathaway) was set in a juvenile penitentiary in the 1960s, and her most recent, *Lapvona* (2022), is set in a medieval [fiefdom](#) where child abuse, murder and even cannibalism take place. The [common thread](#) in Moshfegh's body of work is a sense of the [uncanny](#); her stories feature obscure and sometimes odious characters whose behaviour and motivations the reader struggles to understand. Her [novella](#) *McGlue*, first published in 2014 by an independent publisher, is narrated by a drunk and disoriented sailor as he is transported as a prisoner in the [hold](#) of a ship.

## UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

To find out more, Speak Up attended a press conference where Moshfegh was talking about her books. As the author explained, McGlue was inspired by a news item published in a New England newspaper in 1851 that read: “Salem. Mr. McGlue the sailor has been [acquitted](#) on the [count](#) of murder which he was found guilty of committing in the port of Zanzibar by reason of his being out of his mind since having hit his head when he fell from a train several months prior and because he was in a [blacked-out](#) state of drunkenness at the time [he stabbed](#) a man to death.” As she explained, she adopted an unusual strategy to write the story through the voice of this [unreliable](#) narrator: **Otessa Moshfegh (American accent):** When I decided I wanted to write McGlue, I knew I had to get into his head if it was going to be an interesting story. So I imagined that I was him, and that all I really had to do was allow him to speak through me. I put behind my desk a mirror because I thought it would be useful if I found myself assuming the postures or the expressions of the character. That was actually a really important part of the process because McGlue, as a personality, was really mysterious to me. So in a way I had to physically imagine being him in order to understand how he might talk or what his attitude would have been. In many ways, it is purely about what it is to exist as a consciousness. I think McGlue is in some ways probably an [asshole](#).

## BACKGROUND

Otessa Moshfegh was born in 1981 to musician parents: her father is an Iranian Jew and her mother is Croatian. However, she does not believe that her [upbringing](#) in an immigrant household had any special influence on her approach to literature. **Otessa Moshfegh:** I don’t think I had a typical immigrant experience or first generation experience. Yes, my parents are from two different [countries](#), but [the fact] that their common language was English and I was born in America, I think those things made me more interested in America than in my parents’ home [countries](#). I’ve never even been to my father’s [hometown](#) of Iran. My parents didn’t teach me their respective languages. I grew up on a [steady diet](#) of what was the family’s culture, which was really music. Both of my parents were musicians. And then my ongoing addiction of [jump roping](#) in the [basement](#), watching television for twelve hours a day. So I had this strange, high-low cultural input.

## PRESCIENT

The impact of My Year of Rest and Relaxation, with its theme of isolation and introspection, was amplified by the global [lockdown](#) imposed by the pandemic. Moshfegh admits that the coincidence [upset](#) her. **Otessa Moshfegh:** I definitely

believe in synchronicity. My Year of Rest and Relaxation, when I was editing the end — spoiler alert! —, the best friend character is believed to be seen jumping to escape the fires in the Twin Towers on  $\frac{9}{11}$ . As I was editing that section, a very close friend of mine called me — and I'll never forget it — to tell me that our mutual friend had just committed suicide by jumping out of a building. And so that really disturbed me. Since then, I always ask myself "What do I want to put out there?" But it doesn't work. It doesn't work for me to try to control it. I mean, yeah, there was a pandemic, but I didn't cause the pandemic, right?.

## HUMOUR

Moshfegh [has a knack](#) for provoking [ennui](#) and even [angst](#) in the reader. But there is a lot of unintended humour, too. **Otessa Moshfegh:** A lot of the humour that I discovered in my own writing was by accident. When I was working on short stories that ended up in my short story collection Homesick for Another World, I found that I could tap into something very, very funny if I just tried to write about how depressed I was. Like these super grandiose testaments to what I was experiencing as though I was the only person on Earth who had a mind... It was sort of exploratory and indulgent, but ended up teaching me a lot about what I found funny and true about what an isolated consciousness tells itself.

## USE OF LANGUAGE

Often crude and passively violent, Moshfegh's stories are designed to build a physical experience through the use of language. **Otessa Moshfegh:** I think when there's something quite strong in the language, a description that might elicit a response like disgust, or fear, or anxiety, or discomfort, it makes the reader take it all a little bit more personally, because now the book is in their body. Like you are feeling, feeling it, even if you're like, "It's not a good feeling." But it [registers](#) and now the reader has a more interesting relationship with the book. I think it adds a [layer](#) to the experience of reading. It's sort of like when you watch pornography: now you're watching something that might be [turning you on](#), so now are you part of it? Sort of bringing the reader into the book.

## NASTY PEOPLE

Moshfegh is [drawn to](#) creating unpleasant characters, as she explains. **Otessa Moshfegh:** Usually I'm interested in someone who I don't really like very much; there's something sort of [distasteful](#) about them in some way, something that I find offensive, because I'm a very [uptight](#) person and I like to imagine what were the circumstances of them forming themselves; the self that is appearing on these pages.

## RELATING TO THE WORLD

In writing, Moshfegh claims to have found her way of relating to the world and has decided to make the most of it. **Otessa Moshfegh:** It's impossible to figure out how to be a successful novelist. It's impossible. You either are on the [path](#) or you're not. So when I figured out that I was on the [path](#) that I had, like, [lucked out](#), won the lottery, I was like, "OK, I am not gonna waste this opportunity." Because I knew how rare it was. So I just decided to be completely obsessed with writing. That's what I did. I mean, I write like a maniac. I've published books every several years, but in the meantime I'm also doing like a thousand other things. You know, I'm working in film, writing essays... other stuff. Because I can't really relax. I feel like this life is short and I want to [get through](#) as many stories and figure things out. I feel like writing teaches me a lot, makes me smarter, makes me more whole as a person. Sort of [filling in the cracks](#) so that I can feel like my life is worth something.

---

# Glossary

- **lucked out** = avere fortuna
- **well-adjusted** = equilibrata
- **shortlisted** = selezionare
- **count** = accusa
- **unreliable** = inaffidabile
- **asshole** = stronzo
- **jump roping** = saltare la corda
- **upscale** = di alto livello
- **taps into** = toccare
- **novella** = romanzo breve
- **steady diet** = dieta continua
- **ennui** = tedio
- **solace** = conforto
- **hold** = stiva
- **upbringing** = educazione
- **homeland** = terra natia
- **layer** = strato
- **uncanny** = inspiegabile
- **lockdown** = confinamento
- **angst** = angoscia
- **registers** = incorporare
- **uptight** = rigida, severa
- **stockpiles** = accumulare
- **yet** = anche, ancora
- **blacked-out** = incosciente
- **basement** = seminterrato
- **distasteful** = sgradevoli
- **get through** = affrontare, percorrere
- **common thread** = filo comune
- **upset** = turbare
- **drawn to** = attrarre
- **path** = cammino
- **filling in the cracks** = riempire le crepe
- **dread** = timore
- **drive** = impulso
- **he stabbed** = pugnare
- **has a knack** = avere abilità
- **turning you on** = eccitare
- **fiefdom** = feudo
- **acquitted** = assolvere