

Miriam Sved, *A Universe of Sufficient Size*, Picador, 2019. ISBN: 9781743535127.

*Reviewed by Giulia Mastrantoni*

Miriam Sved's *A Universe of Sufficient Size* is a novel on limits and limitations. This theme is present on several levels throughout the novel, particularly in terms of the historical context and the mathematical element that plays a crucial role in the development of the plot. It is through the characters' choices, however, that the theme of limits and limitations becomes especially evident. Indeed, characters make choices that clearly show their own limits or, in other words, their weaknesses. Furthermore, every choice comes with unforeseen consequences that in turn limit someone else's freedom. From this perspective, Sved's novel is focused on the loss of freedom in the characters' lives. However, there is a significant exception to this: the character of Pali represents, indeed, the importance of intellect and talent for freedom.

Firstly, the Nazi backdrop defines a clear, strong set of rules that limits the freedom of the characters in the novel. Set for most part in 1938 in Hungary, the novel explores the consequences following the introduction of anti-Jewish laws in the characters' lives. Indeed, being all Jewish, none of them are allowed to graduate upon completion of their studies or be offered stable academic positions. The characters live in fear of the progressive spread of Hitler's ideas, which are being embraced by the Hungarian government. The character of Ildiko is particularly affected by racial laws, as both her parents lose their teaching jobs; this forces Ildiko to live in poverty, ultimately pushing her to look for ways to exit Hungary.

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Anti-Jewish laws are also the reason why Tibor insists that his friends seek job opportunities abroad. Ildiko, Tibor, Eszter, Levi, and Pali all have a remarkable talent for mathematics; Tibor's plan is to exploit that talent to get fellowship opportunities in the US, thus escaping an increasingly dangerous Europe. However, what Tibor is particularly concerned with is Pali's future: Pali is the most brilliant among them, and Tibor does not want his friend's talent to go to waste. Being Jewish, Pali is unable to officially undertake research and he is prevented from making the most out of his exceptional talent. This is why Tibor decides to arrange a meeting between Pali and German Professor András Voigt in Vienna. Tibor's hope is that Professor Voigt will be persuaded to help Pali emigrate to the US after witnessing his talent for mathematics.

Secondly, mathematics and mathematical limits play a controversial role in the novel. While supposedly being the only resource at the characters' disposal to exit Hungary, it unexpectedly condemns some of them and it is of no use to the others. Indeed, the only character who is able to truly use mathematics to his advantage is Pali. The controversial role that mathematics will play in the characters' lives is somewhat announced to the reader when Ildiko makes a breakthrough on an upper limit problem at the very beginning of the novel. Ildiko shares her finding with Eszter, who suggests working on the problem together with Levi, Pali, and Tibor. However, Ildiko believes that it should be just the two of them to work on it, as this could represent their opportunity to be offered fellowships and escape Hungary. While mathematics may be the characters' saving grace, it serves also as a source of tension and conflict for them.

Thirdly, each character is subject to their own limitations, which often stem from a lack of courage, or the impossibility of being torn from loved ones. For example, Eszter's inability to keep Ildiko's intuition on the upper limit problem secret stems from her desire to connect with Pali, whom she deeply loves. Much on the same line, Tibor's desire to arrange a meeting between Pali and Professor Voigt stems from Tibor's need to prove himself helpful and brave. Every decision made by characters throughout the novel leads to unforeseen limitations being imposed on a third party.

In conclusion, *A Universe of Sufficient Size* is a marvellous novel that surprises the reader with a final mind-blowing plot twist and many in-between unforeseen

events, a must-read for anyone who enjoys unconventional romance in a time of social change.

GIULIA MASTRANTONI is currently completing her PhD in Creative Writing at Monash University under the supervision of A/Prof Asher Flynn and Dr John Hawke. Her research focuses on how rape has been portrayed in fiction, creative nonfiction and nonfiction. Giulia has published a short novel with the Italian publisher Panesi Edizioni. Several of her short tales have been published in anthologies and she has won the international Napoli Cultural Classic prize for young writers. She also translated Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did at School* (*Le avventure di Katy a scuola*).