

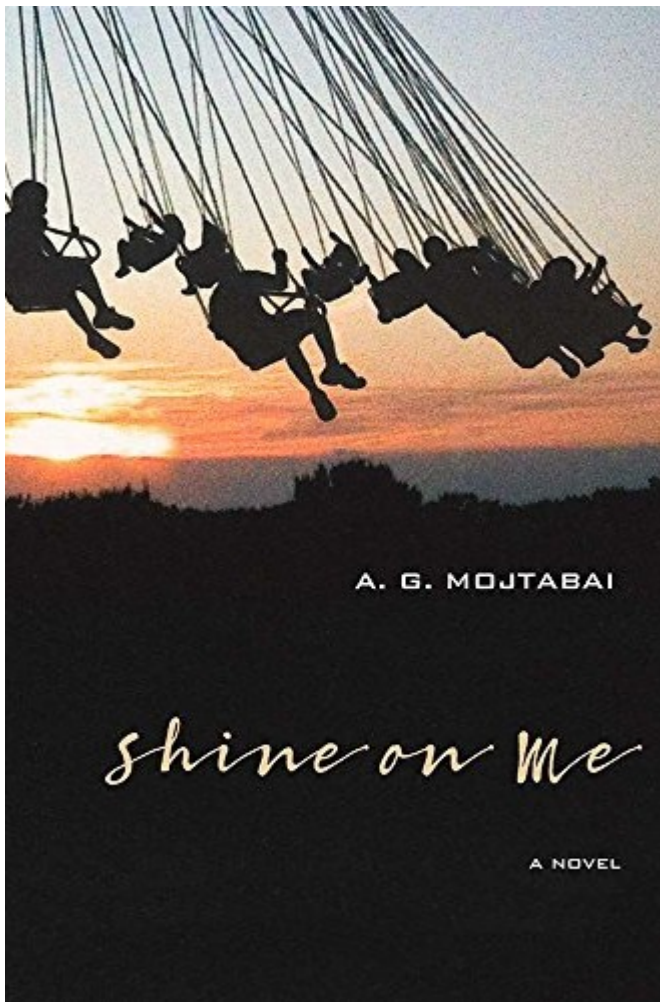
Hands on

**Nothing much happens in this novel—and yet, everything happens.**

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

January 17, 2017

## In Review



**Shine on Me**

## A Novel

by A. G. Mojtabai  
Triquarterly

My five-year-old, whose booster seat in the car provides her a clear view of the driver, is more fastidious than a driver's education teacher. "HANDS ON!" she yells anxiously whenever I take a hand off the wheel momentarily. (No matter if I've removed the hand in order to hand her the snack she's requested or take the dirty tissue she is thrusting my way. Apparently, mothers who drive are expected to meet their children's every need while also keeping both hands on the wheel at all times.)

But I understand the impulse behind my daughter's exhortations. There's security in holding on to the things that we think will keep us steady or safe. Or, in the case of A. G. Mojtabai's new novel, holding on to the things that we most desire. The novel revolves around an event that happened years ago and was later documented in a [film](#) and portrayed in a Tony-nominated Broadway [musical](#): a contest sponsored by a Texas car dealer in which the person who keeps his or her hand on a new truck the longest gets to keep it. The book is focused primarily on the tedious hours during the latter portion of the contest, but Mojtabai's rich portrayals of her characters' inner lives through sparse prose build an intriguing narrative that deepens as the plot unfolds.

This book, at its heart, is about people: what drives them, what haunts them, what sabotages them, what propels them to success. As the hours turn into days and fatigue sets in, reality slips further from both contestants and observers. They use the bathroom breaks to psych one another out over cigarettes. They taunt one another, discovering and exploiting each other's psychological weaknesses. They attempt to trick one another into removing their hands from the truck. For each of them, the fears and failures of the past merge with the present, shaping what it means to stand under a tent beneath the broad Texas sky with strangers competing over a common goal.

Newspaper reporter Trew Reade (the irony of whose name is lost on nobody) finds himself inexplicably drawn into the drama of the event he's assigned to cover. Sixty-some hours into the contest, he ignores his wife's advice that he take a nap, explaining that it's not the truck that keeps him raptly observing. "It's the intensity of the *wanting* that surrounds it that's got him hooked." As it turns out, Trew has

sharpened his skill in observing people through his prior assignment at the newspaper: being present at every execution that occurs in the state of Texas.

He'd stayed with it as long as he could stand it, reporting from the death house, bearing his crumb of witness for the human ant-heap. It was too much—it was not enough. . . . Most of the condemned men were black men or brown, had little schooling, came from broken families, the wrong side of town. Innocent, or guilty, or swept along—who could say with the necessary certainty? . . . All he could do was to keep on witnessing for as long as he could bear it, writing up the executions one by one, keeping a blank numerical tally, a sum total of completions, relying on the condemned man's last words to do the rest.

To put words to paper as someone draws his last breath is perhaps analogous to holding onto a chrome vehicle with the hope that it might become yours. It's at once futile and redemptive.

Bev, a contestant who endures the contest by singing praise songs, praying, and speaking in tongues, is the receptionist in a tattoo-removal clinic. "Everyone coming in had the same wish—to abolish the trace. They all needed to start over. . . . Bev understands, and she believes in second chances." As a contestant, Bev is resilient, held aloft by her trust that Jesus' love shines on her even in those moments when she feels it the least.

But in this contest there are no second chances, and the eliminated contestants struggle to return to reality. Clare, watching from the sidelines, finds that she can't balance her weight on both feet when she no longer has the truck to lean against. A young woman who can't remember her own name wanders confusedly until she's taken into the dealership's office by security personnel. As the contest proceeds and the stakes endanger some characters, the folly of staying awake for so many consecutive hours becomes apparent. "The winner appears dazed" before getting behind the wheel. The final lesson seems to be this: as broken and in search of stability as we are, sometimes we're set free only by letting go.