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Literary

A Brief Life (Extraordinary Classics)
Juan Carlos Onetti
Serpent's Tail
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While the summer heat casts a stifling spell over Buenos Aires, Juan Maria Brausen loses his mind. He wavers between his usual daily life, which includes a fraught relationship with his wife of five years who has recently undergone a mastectomy, and two alternative lives born from his own imagination. In this masterpiece of modern literature, Juan Carlos Onetti leads his readers through the twisted passageways of a deteriorating consciousness until reality can be, should be, questioned on all sides.

Brausen knows his relationship with Getrudis' body will never be the same after her breast is removed. As she recovers from the surgery and tries to regain her own sense of potential by returning to her childhood home, Brausen practices intense escapism through a screenplay he's writing about a tired doctor in the town of Santa Maria. Dr. Diaz Grey falls in love with a pretty morphine addict and risks his career and his life to follow her through her own demise.

Obsession with the characters in a screenplay isn't sufficient distraction. Brausen also spends long hours spying on his neighbor, La Queca, through the shared walls of their adjacent apartments. Soon, though, simply listening to the conversations, the sex, and the arguments isn't enough for Brausen and he invites himself over, calling himself Arce, and becomes entangled in a web of abuse, deceit, and murder.

A Brief Life is not an easy read, but it is a beautiful one. It requires attention and a willingness to work at the winding lines and paragraphs that fold upon each other like origami. This novel asks its readers to trust in the author's unconventional but pitch-perfect sense of plot and theme. Onetti, deceased author of several books and recipient of Uruguay's national literature prize and Spain's Cervantes Prize, leads readers from foothold to foothold across the turbulent river of Brausen's mind. He writes, "…I could think again of all the men living there to whom I had given birth—men whom I could make conceive of love as an absolute, and

recognize themselves in the act of love and accept this image forever… and I could think, finally, that I was capable of giving them each a lucid and painless death, so they would understand the meaning of what they had lived." Brausen's reflection on the characters he's created could be Onetti's own gift to his readers: a chance to know better the meaning of the lives they lead.