



A Mania of Love

J N Pratley

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A Mania of Love by J. N. Pratley is an introspective foray into the history and philosophy of ancient Greece via the life of one of its poets.

Clarence is a Classics professor vacationing on—or perhaps banished to—the Greek island of Paros after a heated argument with fellow faculty members. While there, he's also at work on a writing project. Immersing himself in Greek life, he hopes to draw inspiration for a biographical novel about the poet Archilochus, composed as if the poet were set squarely in modern times.

Meticulously recording his time spent on Paros, Clarence notices striking parallels between himself and the Archie of his novel, mostly in terms of romantic and sexual entanglements. The story's culmination is an ambiguous but disturbing reminder of the tenuousness of the human heart and psyche.

Greek life and culture are on full display in the text. This is sometimes enriching, though references to history and philosophy are also intrusive at times and risk making the novel too obscure for laypeople. Speculation on the nature of life and death, primarily through Clarence's British neighbors who are obsessed with near-death experiences, leads to a curious connection between Clarence and Archie, though this is not sufficiently explored.

Despite an isolated episode in which Clarence visualizes himself having a conversation with the poet Archilochus, Clarence's shift in mental health by the end is abrupt within the narrative. Similarly, a confessional character study morphs into an unsolved murder mystery, which is jarring.

Chapters alternate between Clarence's journal entries and the story of Archie with little stylistic difference. Archie's portions of the book tend toward exposition, and suffer from a lack of further construction. Prose often goes over the top, bordering on ostentatious, especially when Clarence opines at length on the appeal of the Greek mindset. The island landscape itself is well rendered with bountiful sensory details.

Clarence and his fictional extension, Archie, are the best developed of the cast, though Liatrice, Archie's love interest, has moments of depth. Almost all characters, including Archie and Clarence, revel in carnal pursuits with tiring frequency, avoiding real love and rarely managing to be sympathetic. Some, particularly Liatrice's old art professor, are especially creepy. The dark, cynical tone of the narration is both off-putting and intriguing by turns.

A Mania of Love is an ambiguous but magnetic invitation into Greek mythology and history.

MEAGAN LOGSDON (October 4, 2016)

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