

Among the Hedges

Sara Mesa

Megan McDowell, Translator

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In Sara Mesa's warm, nuanced novel *Among the Hedges*, a friendship blossoms, defying cultural expectations.

Every day, a thirteen-year-old girl skips school, heads to the park, and spends time writing in her notebook, hidden by hedges and trees. An older man, later revealed to be in his fifties, discovers her there and visits her. Though she is at first suspicious and annoyed by this intrusion, the girl begins to enjoy his company. Calling each other "Soon" and "Old Man," the two develop rapport, but the threat of discovery looms over their complex friendship.

Knowing that most people would condemn her connection to Old Man, Soon recognizes the potential for danger in her talks with him. She begins to see Old Man's behavior, speech patterns, and single-minded obsession with birds and Nina Simone as unusual. But she is open to what's surprising and unconventional, and her nonjudgmental nature reveals new worlds to her.

Soon's responses to Old Man are both perceptive and limited. She recognizes his essential kindness, but a poignant contrast emerges between what she understands and what adults would grasp about his character. The narration focuses on Soon's thoughts and feelings, switching between interior and exterior views of her, resulting in glimpses of how she sees herself and how she appears to the world.

Tension builds as Soon misses more and more school, and as temperatures drop with the approach of winter. Uncertainty about whether Soon's parents will learn of her truancy, or whether the park maintenance workers will discover and report her and Old Man, results in almost unbearable suspense.

Among the Hedges is a daring, sympathetic novel about a friendship between two people whom society would prefer to keep apart.

REBECCA HUSSEY (May / June 2021)

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