



Aria: A Novel

Susan Segal

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“There’s only one way to get through this — to get through the second that just passed and the one we’re in right now and the one coming up.” So says Eve, the narrator of *Aria*, explaining how she survives the death at sea of her husband and two children. Segal’s writing is pitch perfect, depicting the aftershock of tragedy, the “utter lack of feelings that was not numbness so much as a sort of sublime indifference.” That affective paralysis is echoed in the flat present tense of her prose.

Opera, with its melodramatically heightened emotion, is the conduit through which feeling returns to her, but at a distanced level of metaphors that are “the only viable, bearable means of survival.” Operatic metaphors don’t protect her for long, however; the emotions she has borrowed from *La Bohème* start insidiously eating away at the indifference that has sustained her. Unable to stand the pain of returning to life, Eve retreats behind a wall of pills and alcohol and a willed refusal to enter into the world.

Enter the world, however, she apparently must, if only for the sake of a plot—at which point the novel falters. In part because Segal has so carefully established Eve’s distancing strategy, when the plot draws her into a love pentangle, accompanied by stalking tabloid reporters, the other characters never quite come into focus; the numbers involved in the complicated love-and-betrayal storyline cannot substitute for the missing emotional complexity. And sadly, because the characters in this portion of the book are small and underdeveloped, the narrator too is diminished in their company.

The book is at its painful best when it leaves the love story behind and chronicles Eve’s struggle to deal with her loss and her guilt by writing them down. She records her account of events leading up to the accident-italicized and set apart from the rest of the narrative-in the past tense. They strike precisely the right note, repackaging the past in her own metaphors, making it bearable for her. These metaphors, paradoxically, allow her to tell the truth and to face the source of much of her guilt.

The author, whose short stories have won several awards, teaches writing at the University of Southern California and the University of California at Irvine. In this novel, when she steers away from the noisy, staged emotions of opera and of the love story, Segal allows Eve a quiet and entirely believable catharsis through her writing, speaking for and by herself, as the title suggests.

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