Clarion Review

Biography

Ethereal Madness
Ivan West
Lulu
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Three Stars (out of Five)

> *'The answers are a mystery. It's in the searching that we even begin to recognize the questions.'*

Ethereal Madness embraces one of the most dangerous and excruciating acts known to humankind which should be avoided whenever possible: Talking About the Relationship. The unnamed protagonist of these ten dialogue-centered short stories has a problem with triangles. "'I'm in love with a woman I'm not seeing I'm seeing a woman I'm not in love with and I'm also married.'" Sounds like a cheater who really applies himself but halfhearted peccadilloes take place only at the insistence of his wife who openly admits her love for another man. She moves to a distant city but continues a loose hold on her family as well visiting on odd weekends like an army reservist.

The mostly-abandoned husband outwardly exhibits a high-minded lack of jealousy. He bounces complicated thoughts off a masseuse an artist friend a mental health professional and others. There is no all-encompassing guidebook for the ever-evolving modern marriage—the correct response to change can be buried. The protagonist's apparently advanced evolution has him tending to the children while his astrologically-guided wife uses absence and sexual relations to work out trauma resurfacing from a previous stage in life. In the story *The Alchemist* the decision to accept experimentation is second-guessed: "'Lord knows I let her down. Apparently I was supposed to be *pissed* walk out on her slap her around…'"

Spareness is utterly key with a serious conflict of attachment and control laid out and completely addressed in a run of short quick bursts. Whether one *loves* another or is *in-love* instead shapes trajectories. That distinction has rarely been faced so directly before by a male character in fiction. This emotional case study wastes nothing but omits context en route to a

turbulent core. The lack of names and locations creates a sense of remove which augments the protagonist's suffering but limits the reader's connection. It's a tricky dynamic. Short poems between stories function as progress summaries. The opening story starring the Greek philosopher Socrates is tangential to the other tightly linked pieces.

Polyamory presents a series of challenges radically different from the dominant relationship mode of serial monogamy. The primary dilemma is fairly uncommon so various sounding boards return both bad advice and good. Definitely original *Ethereal Madness* doesn't reprise any other work of fiction; it is compelling enough that a single-sitting read-through is likely. West's novel *Two Weeks in August* is also available through the same publisher.