



Exquisite

Sarah Stovell

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Mounting tensions make this psychological thriller hard to put down.

Sarah Stovell's *Exquisite* is a dark, sensual, and twisted character study, rife with murky motivations and sinister revelations.

Best-selling author Bo Luxton has everything she could ever want: two beautiful daughters, a loving husband, and a peaceful home. She decides to reach out and nurture young writers at a weeklong retreat. There, she meets the vibrant Alice Dark. Alice floats through life with little direction, but the attention from a beautiful, intelligent older woman ignites a spark within her.

When their relationship takes a turn, the story begins in full force and spans a disastrous attempt to break things off. After an explosive affair, Bo claims that Alice is a crazed stalker. With little evidence available to counter Bo's claims, Alice fears that she is a psychological mastermind.

Exquisite is a taut psychological thriller that benefits from dueling unreliable narrators. Neither Bo nor Alice can be trusted, but for vastly different reasons. Bo's side of the narrative seems to be the more accurate, but Alice's haunting point of view paints a picture of a dastardly psychopath. Between their narratives, an unnamed narrator pens a starkly terrifying journal about seeking revenge once they get out of prison.

The first-person narrative shines, reinforcing the unreliable natures of both Bo and Alice. Even though their thoughts and actions are laid bare, the disparity between their sides of the story makes the tension mount incredibly well. Snappy dialogue and minimal scene setting sets off the prose, allowing the story to focus on characterization, all of which lends a voyeuristic thrill.

The language is dark and charged with eroticism, though sex scenes are minimal. Instead, the focus is on Bo and Alice's emotional connection and their reactions. Details come with explorations of the fallout from the affair, of Bo's dramatic childhood and previous relationships, and of the slow buildup to the couple's first encounter. The clever use of texts, e-mails, and voice-mail messages keeps the plot flitting ahead.

Exquisite is an engrossing story about two troubled people who connect despite having every reason not to. Tensions mount, making it hard to put down.

JOHN M. MURRAY (September/October 2017)

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