

Faded Acts of Love

Joseph F. Alexander

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Veteran short story author Joseph F. Alexander's debut novel, *Faded Acts of Love*, is a sweeping saga spanning several years of love battered by loss, unresolved grief, and impulsiveness. When adman Peter is an impressionable twenty-three-year old, he meets sexually-experienced, sophisticated Fiona. After a torrid four-month liaison, she summarily drops him without reason, cutting off all contact. Peter responds by quickly marrying Adrienne, but something inside him remains unfulfilled. While the couple does love each other, their long union is marred by Peter's womanizing, his inability to forget Fiona, and unexpected deaths.

The novel's strength lies in its description. This globe-trotting story easily transports readers from Manhattan to Tuscany and back again, making readers feel as if they are actually journeying with Peter. Alexander also astutely explores how unresolved grief can create a wedge of unspoken pain to drive people apart. Additionally, given the current popularity of the TV show *Mad Men*, Peter's Don-Draperesque behavior is exquisitely realized as he climbs up the advertising corporate ladder. Although Peter commits adultery and objectifies his partners, he nonetheless remains a sympathetic protagonist. Reader empathy for the main character stems from Alexander's masterful ability to show how Peter's behavior results from his emotional turmoil. Peter is sympathetic because although he is a cad, he is a suffering cad whose pain affirms his humanity, similar to the way Don Draper's pain softens the main character's sexist behavior in *Mad Men*. Alexander has an MFA, and this novel showcases his full writing talents with delightfully evocative phrasing. For example, Peter mentions how "the snout" of Adrienne's breast grazes him when they first meet.

Unfortunately, the author's descriptive finesse and literary phrasing also prevent *Faded* from being more powerful. Alexander's emphasis on description leads him to tell events that would be more poignant if shown. Description can only indicate so much of how people wallow in sorrow; one needs specific incidents and more dialogue to render this grief completely believable. Sadly, this much-needed dialogue and reaction comes too late in the book. A key event is merely reported instead of experienced in the present, thereby dulling the impact of the incident. At times the novel reads like stand-alone, connected scenes more suited to the format of a short story. Alexander's prose results in most of the dialogue sounding like that of erudite professors, instead of characters in pain. While the trenchant and sardonic repartee deserves admiration, the characters have so many apt lines that they often sound like mouthpieces for ideas instead of actual people. Ultimately, *Faded Acts of Love* is a first-rate debut from an exceptional author.

JILL ALLEN (November 28, 2012)

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