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Frottage and Even as We Speak

Mona Houghton
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Mona Houghton's debut consists of two novellas that delve into the chaotic lives of characters, their desperation, and the resulting messiness. Although the novella is not a form that is read as popularly as a novel, it can be just as compelling when the author understands, as Houghton does, the elements of its form. With alarming honesty and expertly crafted prose, Houghton's novellas guide the reader through the emotional byways of each of her characters and create a narrative tension fueled by their sense of urgency.

In the first story, *Frottage*, Houghton examines that word's meanings through the epistolary letters from Claire to her therapist, Paul. Claire is a middle-aged teacher, unhappy in her marriage and struggling with her urge to sexualize all her relationships. Her letters to Paul are confrontational, confessional, and manipulative, and they ultimately reveal the origins of her sexual tendencies. Claire's voice is intelligent, hilarious, and desperate as she attempts to seduce Paul in her twice-weekly sessions and through the letters she writes in response to what happens in those sessions. With a skillful hand, Houghton reveals the right information at the right time so the reader receives only what is necessary to understand Claire and learn of the family history that motivates her behavior. By the end of the novella, the reader witnesses how this frottage—emotional, physical, and psychological—afflicts her present in a tragic and poignant way.

In the second story, *Even as We Speak*, the author's lens zooms in on one moment in which all of the novella's characters intersect, and then zooms out to show how the characters arrived at that intersection. Houghton creates four storylines that involve Brandon, an eco-terrorist on the run with his kidnapped little girl, Crystal; Billy and Bob, twins who own a beef jerky business and quickly relapse into crack addiction; Kendra, a big-breasted college girl who escapes her life after a devastating loss; and Suzie, an older accountant with a gambling problem who leaves her husband. The pace of this novella is quicker and jerkier than *Frottage*, which emphasizes the dire necessity for the characters to escape the lives they have created. Occasionally, there is unevenness in Houghton's portrayals, with Billy and Bob lacking the complexity of the other characters. But the lives of each in the group converge at a roadside convenience mart in an irrevocable way, providing a satisfactory ending.

Mona Houghton has a talent for examining characters on the fringe, those who want to be accepted on their own terms. These two works display her understanding of the form and showcase her ability to capture the history of a character's desperation in lyrical prose and subtle irony. No matter how offbeat their stories, Houghton reveals through her characters the universal desire to be understood.

MONICA CARTER (May 31, 2012)

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