



How to Walk on Water and Other Stories

Rachel Swearingen

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The characters of Rachel Swearingen's beguiling short story collection sparkle with charisma, living high on testing boundaries.

A couple finds the perfect apartment, but it's filled with the belongings of the previous resident, and her sad story and circumstances haunt their happiness. A struggling entomologist hatches a plot for vengeance on her inconsiderate, boisterous neighbors, but ends up unleashing a once-ally's madness. A psychiatrist in remission, having lost his entire family to the disease he survived, watches the woman in the apartment opposite his indulge her pica in a nightly ritual, and decides to send her more ideals to consume. A Vietnam veteran is pulled along as his sister, careless of her mottled past, elects to kidnap her grandson and baptize him. An artist arranges objects to create bewitching stories from shadow, upending a stock broker's curated sense of normalcy.

Following these story lines is a voyeuristic pleasure. Swearingen's characters, all nerve and verve, upend social hierarchies: the "normal" among them are observed as if in stasis, while those who embrace and nurture their quirks compel interest, often persuading the less misfit people around them toward fuller lives.

But there are also hazards implicit in dancing along the lip of society's cliffs; some characters, heedless of this, edge near to madness. "It's the stereotype you fear most that you can't escape," comments a wealthy, fascinating, and troubled girl to her enchanted Midwestern roommate in their chaotic dorm, her observation visionary but her self-reflection shelved. She, and others, learn that the trouble with tantalizing centered friends toward rule-breaking is that you're left with no one to save you from yourself.

In the shocking and appealing stories of *How to Walk on Water*, characters meet every ill-advised "what if?" with one-upmanship, resulting in dangers and delights.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September / October 2020)

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