



I've Never Done This Before

Claire Rudy Foster

KLIN + SBR (Oct 4, 2016)

Hardcover \$12.95 (98pp)

978-0-9980727-0-8

This collection is a modern, feminist meditation on relationships.

Claire Rudy Foster ruminates on the harried and complicated identities of men and women in a contemporary American hegemonic context, in her short-story collection *I've Never Done This Before*. These six tales vibrate with violence and alienation, exploring sexuality as a weapon, a commodity, a link, or a wedge between lovers and strangers, yet Foster's literary explorations refrain from making big-picture pronouncements, deferring to the intimate and immediate.

Foster's writing is firm, grounded in a contemporary realistic literary style, with each story more resembling a meaningful snapshot than a dissection of the situation and its players. Strong metaphors are put to good use, allowing for multiple readings and intentional ambiguity. Although sex and sensuality are central to the series, eroticism and romance generally take a backseat to more factual, functional expressions of desire, which often goes unquenched.

A persistent theme of absence permeates each tale—a woman's husband has retreated from her in favor of Internet porn; a man's girlfriend attempts to torment him with not-so-subtle hints at infidelity—and what the corresponding partners choose to fill this void is of particular interest. In "Runaway," Foster writes in the second person, drawing the reader into complicity; its tenor warns against choosing to be distant from or abandon the protagonist—and perhaps, by extension, the rest of the characters in the collection.

Coupling isn't romanticized, despite a general tone that favors it throughout the collection: "My body missed him. My heart was on the fence," observes the narrator in "Fidelity," while Foster explores the concept of finding a relational "good fit" via a tailoring metaphor. Emotional and physical compatibility, and alienation from/of both the self and others, are an extension of this theme of separate, distant genders.

Characters are allowed to exist as both tender and rough, with external expressions often contrasting, out of habit or survival, with the interior. Foster's stories examine classic questions: What do men really want from women? Is objectification unavoidable? Can fatalistic opposition truly benefit anyone involved, even those presumed to inhabit more advantageous social positions? This collection is a modern, feminist meditation.

PATTY COMEAU (Winter 2017)

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