



Jerusalem Ablaze: Stories of Love and Other Obsessions

Orlando Ortega-Medina

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These thirteen stories are atmospheric, focusing on complicated relationships with skill.

More than a little dark, but still grounded, Orlando Ortega-Medina's *Jerusalem Ablaze: Stories of Love and Other Obsessions* is a strong debut collection.

The book's subtitle is apt, as the thirteen stories that form it all focus on complicated relationships, whether they involve a couple, a parent and child, or a teenager coming to terms with his sexual awakening. The stories are structured well and tightly paced, each allowing its conflict to reveal itself slowly and logically.

Arguably the best work in the collection is the two-part story "An Israel State of Mind," in which a young American couple travels to Israel to spend time working on a kibbutz. In the first part, the boyfriend is introduced as possibly too religious for the kibbutz lifestyle, and becomes jealous when a flirtatious cab driver takes an interest in his more outgoing girlfriend. The second story plays off many of the questions raised by their interactions and their attitudes toward the trip.

The protagonist of "Invitation to the Dominant Culture" begins by insisting that his story isn't like Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, a clever wink before telling a story with themes along those same lines, in which his parents' insistence on turning his bedroom into a Catholic shrine does nothing to prevent his teenage lust.

"Torture by Roses" involves a young man in Japan accepting an apprenticeship with a well-known, wealthy benefactor, and begins with a reference to the older man's suicide and the younger's fascination with death. The whole story carries a foreboding uneasiness, effectively hinting at a troubling outcome as the conflict builds at a good pace.

The title story involves a conversation between a dominatrix and a priest who has come to visit her, and who truly learns the kind of pain that she can inflict. Here, too, character motivations come into sharp focus only as the characters' fates are decided, making a short piece feel lived-in and thorough.

These stories were inspired by the author's travels, which shows through their settings and mores that combine effectively to showcase Ortega-Medina's variety of storytelling skills.

JEFF FLEISCHER (September/October 2017)

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