

Love and Other Monsters in the Dark: Short Stories

K. B. Jensen

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Love and Other Monsters in the Dark is a dynamic short story collection that darts through memorable situations.

The entries of K. B. Jensen's entertaining flash fiction collection *Love and Other Monsters in the Dark* brim with aching surprises; they feature eccentric secrets and solitary monsters.

Whether they are plausible, hyperbolic, or fantastical, these stories relish in circumstances that lead people toward new awareness. They're linked by quiet treacheries: a wedding cake poisoner plots against his sister, but his malice catches up to him; a teenage cannibal is pained by harassment and consumes her tormentor; a man who is turned into a weaponized bird lures a woman toward a visceral transformation. "The Wall" is a dystopian reversal of the US-Mexico border crisis and focuses on a girl's fear of separation; "Catfishing in the Time of Covid" concentrates on a fraudster with pangs of conscience, and features an act of mercy.

Jensen's characters are roundly intriguing. They are often both odd and vulnerable, and they are humanized even in weird situations. Even when they go to extremes, their stories have sympathetic elements. There are lovers who feel invisible, including housewives who stage encounters to gain their husbands' attention, and people whose strained relationships fray even further. One woman awakens, having aged overnight, and is reassured by her partner; elsewhere, a suicidal woman finds reprieve from her despair via an expression of unexpected loyalty. The book's monsters are also diverse and complex, too, from those whose hideousness is physical to those who look like people, but whose souls are corrupt, raising intriguing questions about the forms that darkness takes.

In these flash fiction stories, the prose hones in on powerful images. The narrations themselves are straightforward, following along as people endure wild circumstances with often rewarding results. But while love encompasses surprising breadth in the collection's most hopeful tales, there are also somewhat familiar scenarios among its offerings. There are women whose bodies become monstrous, like manifestations of their pain; there are shocking murders, too. Some of the stories' have abrupt, punchline endings, as with one featuring a squirrel in a restaurant and a vengeful act. There are macabre closing lines as well: a serial killer asks her victim a question; a woman fleeing from an aggressive man is given a warning. Such stories are more situational, with fewer lingering effects.

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KAREN RIGBY (May 16, 2022)

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