



Mirror Mirror: A Collection of Memoirs and Stories

Stephanie Hart

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Adulthood brings the universal need to reconcile our personal history with the present. It's a dicey proposition to attempt to take the pains of childhood and craft them into a fulfilling adult life. Hart faces this challenge with a gentle touch in this retrospective coming-of-age book. She shares with readers how she learned to see herself through the mirror of her ancestors—and how she sees her ancestors through the alternatively judging and forgiving mirror of her memory.

Hart is a writing teacher at The Fashion Institute of Technology and Parsons the New School for Design. Perhaps as a result, her writing bears an artful—almost impressionistic—quality, relying on lyricism rather than plot and tension to engage readers.

The book is divided into five sections, focusing on childhood in the 1950s and 60s, boarding school, high school, adulthood, imagined accounts of family history, and coming to terms with the aftermath of it all. The chapters within the sections are short (many just two pages), but the consistent, nostalgic tone gives the book a savoring, contemplative speed.

Each chapter is laden with vivid yet sometimes enigmatic images, alluring readers with crisp evocations of mood and poignant descriptions of characters. The book's vignettes are tinted with hurt and sadness. Hart paints these universal feelings through her experiences with her parents' divorce, boarding school, loneliness, lost love, and early menopause. She also explores elements of Jewish, feminine, and family identity.

Hart's timeline ebbs and flows forward during childhood, then surges ahead after adolescence. After the loose but comforting cohesion of the first half—the childhood years—the section about adulthood feels more sparse and unfocused. The family history section travels the globe with ease, but at moments is too tinged with Hart's first-person perspective.

Hart is also the author of *Clouds Like Horses and Other Stories* (which contains some of the stories of *Mirror Mirror*) and the young adult novel *Is There Any Way Out of Sixth Grade?*

Some readers may miss the rising tension and release of story form in these image-filled slices of life; but reflective readers, who seek artistic healing of the common hurts of growing up and growing older, will find that *Mirror Mirror* speaks powerfully.

MELISSA ANNE WUSKE (December 22, 2011)

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