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Romance

My Occasional Torment
Bee Robb
Five Star Publishing
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"Marriage turns romance into misery," says Julia Connery, now fifty-three and worried that hers is going sour. Through Julia's eyes, Bee Robb's *My Occasional Torment* explores relationships between couples—mostly middle-aged couples—who are trying to preserve romantic love while rearing children, learning to deal with elderly parents, or comforting friends whose marriages are falling apart. These issues compound Julia's anguish that her body is showing the effects of age, and her fears that her husband will lose interest. She evokes a judgmental figment of her imagination, Lola Two, a woman who constantly goes to Dr. Plastic for improvement. Lola Two plants doubt wherever she can, reminding Julia of neighborhood affairs and the couples whose love has disintegrated, and advising her to get liposuction, implants, face peels, and teeth whiteners to save her marriage with Sebastian.

This novel delves deeper than it would appear to in the opening pages, where the author is carefully setting background that will explain the peculiar behavior of the Connerys, a family of Scottish ancestry, and their neighbors.

Unusual characters abound. Julia's husband, Sebastian, is not without foibles: history professor and head of the department at the junior college, he drives everyone nuts with his cleanliness compulsion. He confronts people who didn't wash their hands after a bathroom visit: popcorn eaters at the movies; the person taking his order at the pizza parlor; and the priest, giving communion at the altar. Julia's neighbor, Iris, keeps her curtains drawn and wears layers of sun block, even inside; Julia's son posts acerbic notes on his bedroom door, and dresses in "baggy, draggy, saggy rags." Julia's father-in-law, Old Sebastian, knocks holes in the walls of his retirement home, Destiny Place, in search of hidden gangster bones.

Julia gets a job at the rest home and discovers more secrets than bones in the wall. Vignettes that reveal back-stories of the residents and the workers give the novel a lively pace and illuminate the relationships that tie the author's theme together: how to keep a marriage

successful even after fifty or more years.

Robb's cast of delightful characters sometimes borders on the fantastic. However, their problems have real substance, and the writing provides well-constructed solutions. Descriptions of setting are lovely, especially the frequent references to Scotland. The situations in this charming book will interest anyone who likes to laugh while absorbing the author's insights into human nature.

Mary Popham