

O My Darling

Amity Gage

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“ ‘There is no “world,” said Charlotte, wiping her face with her wrist. ‘There’s just a bunch of separate people.’” Coming from a woman who has recently married, and therefore has tied herself, in the very least legally, to another person, this declaration of independence is highly contradictory.

But then little in this novel is exactly as it first seems. In the opening pages, Charlotte and Clark Adair seem like playful newlyweds goofing around in their sunny, yellow kitchen. Clark hides Charlotte’s birthday present behind his back, delighting in making her guess what he’s gotten her. He tells Charlotte: “You look beautiful. Beautiful like a child. It’s amazing. You look like you’re about seven. And you’ve just come in from playing outside.” To which she curtly replies, “I’d never want to be seven again.” It’s the tip of one of their many disagreements, all madly simmering beneath the surface of their relationship. Clark’s childhood was a cheerful-seeming tangle of vivid memories, ruled by a borderline insane mother who sucked him into her “reality.” Charlotte was an orphan raised by a very plain, very solid couple whom she thinks of with a lukewarm fondness.

The two are utterly bland and unexceptional on the surface, a childless couple living small lives in a small house in a small town. Peel back their layers, though, and things become far murkier. Charlotte drinks. Clark sulks. Charlotte can’t get over her lonely childhood. Clark can’t get over his mother’s death. And so things tumble on until the marriage teeters on the edge of falling apart.

This is the first novel by this author, a promising talent out of Brown and the prestigious Iowa Writer’s Workshop who’s already hard at work on novel number two. The book is a sharply drawn, darkly witty, supremely intelligent guide to the souls of two deeply fearful people fighting to make a life together. Clark’s childhood with his crazy mother leaves him unsure of what’s true and what’s make-believe. He writes to Charlotte, “Maybe love just kind of rings and rings like a bell for no reason. Maybe you have to be crazy.” Later, he unexpectedly reveals a crucial difference between himself and his once-abandoned wife. “She can’t stand guessing. Wrapped things make her crazy. She wants to know everything for sure. Me, the less I know the happier I am.” Gage expertly weaves these pointed comments throughout the novel, juxtaposing the foolishness of the characters with their sharp, smarter-than-thou revelations.

O My Darling very successfully examines the fear within a marriage and within two individuals. Despite their flaws, Clark and Charlotte burst with truth and realness in this refreshing story of what ties two people together. (August 18, 2009)

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