



Other People's Phobias

Flaminia Ocampo

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These well-executed, surprising stories succeed best when fears gradually intensify, and when the cold, unsparing nature of the characters' conditions bloom with frightful implications.

Flaminia Ocampo returns with her latest collection of eleven stories that feature eccentric, highly personal aversions. Using matter-of-fact, third-person voices, she expertly combines macabre humor with chilling realizations. These original scenarios expose the illogical, invasive nature of obsession and highlight the sometimes voyeuristic nature of writing on mental illness. *Other People's Phobias* memorably portrays the isolated worlds born from the characters' disturbing convictions.

Some stories depict cruel acts, from a woman who incapacitates her husband with rat poison in "Umbrifer Maritus" to a groom who hardens his heart toward his bride in "The Power of Buttons." The latter is one of the more concisely focused stories—the groom's distaste for buttons leads to the false assumption that his bride will not use them and increasing tension when he discovers them on her wedding gown. Subtler cruelties emerge in the form of blissful ignorance in "The Advantages of Relaxing," which features two yoga class members—each with distinct memories of separate, near-strangulation events—who begin to notice one another without knowing each other's histories as a victim and as a would-be strangler.

Supernatural elements pervade "Rat and Psychopath" and "Love in a Tub"; the former depicts a woman whose uncanny ability to draw rats into her life parallels with a serial killer's presence in the neighborhood, and the latter considers the calming powers of a bathtub that has presumably taken on the energy emitted by a pair of lovers. The most intriguing stories emphasize atmospheric settings. In "Memories of Madness," the daughter of a doctor recalls viewing her childhood, which was spent on asylum grounds, through a prism of colors; in "Umbrifer Maritus," a Chicago apartment crowded with roses becomes an eerie stage for marital discord.

Stories that focus on ruminations—such as the titular "Other People's Phobias," an account of a therapist during office hours, and "Perishables," a story in which an immigrant detests the consumerist trappings of upward mobility to the point of feeling oppressed by objects—are less dramatic and affecting, yet offer glimpses of slightly more common, relatable fears.

These well-executed, surprising stories succeed best when fears gradually intensify, and when the cold, unsparing nature of the characters' varied conditions bloom with frightful implications. Ocampo's gift for concluding her stories at the right moment—neither over-explaining situations nor leaving loose threads—is particularly noteworthy. Many stories end on the brink of further possible danger. Others provide casual, offhand remarks that, upon closer inspection, turn simultaneously damning, as when a character with black-widow tendencies drives her husband into a vegetative state: "After all, each unhappy marriage has its own solutions."

Ocampo's collection is a psychological feast for readers who appreciate stories about offbeat men and women. Here, the characters' dark leanings illuminate the lengths some will go to preserve their sense of "normalcy"—even when it proves hazardous.

KAREN RIGBY (December 20, 2013)

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