



Peripheral Vision

Patricia Ferguson

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A mother's love is never a sure thing. Neither, for that matter, is that of a spouse or child. As precarious as good fortune, such relationships can turn on a dime; or, as is the case with Ferguson's petulant characters, with a wayward glance. Words left un-spoken, gestures left open to interpretation, emotions kept tightly under control: these are the subtleties upon which Britain's Somerset Maugham Award-winning author spins an intricately structured tale of disparate lives, of people who have nothing in common on the face of things yet are bound by their demands for love and acceptance.

Beginning with Sylvia, a successful eye surgeon and new mother who despairs over her lack of maternal feelings for her infant daughter, Ferguson astutely reveals the labyrinthine nature of parent—child relationships. In stark contrast to Sylvia's maternal reserve, her best friend Will, an unemployed actor, is excessively dutiful in caring for his dying mother, even to the point of compromising his own health. Then there are Ruby and George: she, an aloof and taciturn working class mother whose neglect causes her aching self-reliant son to suffer a life-altering injury. And lastly, the idealistic young Iris and Rob. Their relationship is undermined by the insidious influence of Rob's mother and by Iris's perverse method of coping with the tragic circumstances of her own mother's death.

Not only does Ferguson adroitly juggle seemingly divergent stories of incongruous characters, she also travels through time, from the mid-'90s to the mid-'50s, to provide context and motivation for their actions and emotions. It's a lot to keep in the air, but Ferguson pulls it off effortlessly, through crisp dialogue, trenchant observations, and crystalline details that coalesce into an indelible whole. Although her coincidence-laden conclusion may be too neat by half, even this succeeds due to its understated simplicity.

Longlisted for Britain's Orange Prize, Ferguson's fifth novel finally introduces her to the U.S. market, where she will deservedly compete for fans of Elizabeth Berg, Sue Miller, and Anita Shreve. A trained nurse and midwife—aspects of the medical profession that emphasize caring and devotion—Ferguson's empathy for human suffering, both physical and psychological, is palpable yet controlled. Readers looking for a "sure thing" would be wise to cast their sights on this emerging British novelist.

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