

Seeking Shade

Frances Boyle

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Seeking Shade is a wonderful short story collection that speaks to the universality of feelings and circumstances.

Relationships with others and oneself are the center of Frances Boyle's meditative short story collection *Seeking Shade*.

These fourteen stories examine the motivations and anxieties of their distinctive characters. Set in various time periods and provinces of Canada, each is a window into a specific world. Under obvious themes of coming-of-age and understanding the self through connections with others are themes of technological reach, the meaning of parenthood and guardianship, and love.

The collection centers women, though two of its stories are led by men. In "Rest Cure," a man wonders why he was institutionalized despite not exhibiting symptoms of consumption. The feeling of separation follows him even after he reenters society. It is a quiet story. In "Running Through Green," the forest seems to consume a university student. There is a mysterious and sinister undercurrent in his dreams of being chased; when he's awake, he pursues a classmate.

Many stories have that same undercurrent, though none as unresolved. "A Beach on Corfu" takes its cues from a teenager's obsession with the Romantic writers Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley; the lead is impressionable, though, and romanticizes self-harm and inappropriate relationships. In the dystopian-edged "EverPoppy," a heartbreaking story of genetic manipulation, the sinister undercurrent is made the star, as an older woman who's skilled at helping young children explore and experience new things is troubled when her charge is unable to move into the next stage of development.

In "Seeking Shade," a wife and mother seeks to escape an abusive marriage with her two young children. The narrative splits between the mother and her young eldest child. Her fear and paranoia are palpable and, when juxtaposed against her child's innocence and curiosity, result in a sense of urgency. Beyond the forms of speech between the adult and child, the typography is differentiated: the mother's words are set in standard text, while the child's are italicized, so that each character's experiences are visibly definite and paralleled.

Throughout the collection, the prose is flowing and unhurried. Precise language combines with nuances in the characterizations and relationships. And while historical, contemporary, and dystopian stories sit side by side, they are thematically connected.

A wonderful short story collection that speaks to the universality of feelings and circumstances, *Seeking Shade* is contemplative about exploring the shifts within people's inner worlds.

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (September 27, 2021)

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