



Seven Photographs

Alan Rossman

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Seven Photographs is an emotional novel in which two once-strangers brave exposure to write their own promising third acts.

In Alan Rossman's languid novel *Seven Photographs*, neighbors in a Chicago suburb find strength after a tragedy.

Owen is a graphic designer in his sixties who one day strikes up a conversation with his neighbor, Wilson, a retired scientist who dabbles in car restoration. As the seasons progress, Owen draws Wilson out of his depression, all while confronting his own grief following his son's suicide. In this sensitive story, the men's everyday encounters lead them to become each other's lifelines.

Owen narrates. Chapters alternate between a project of Wilson's that uses seven photographs as the inspiration for a self-reckoning; Owen's attendance at a support group; Wilson's estranged family; and lingering, analytical passages.

The writing is steeped in what Owen calls "visual literacy," searching for the story and meaning behind common moments. His diffusive internal commentary spans the delicate nature of social exchanges, observations of his own traits, and full descriptions of settings. His is a wrought, coiled voice, and his narration is laced with haunting reflections.

The heightened tone suits Owen's hypertuned nature, though because of it, main characters are indistinct. They function as ideas poised on the brink of discovery. Janey, Owen's wife, isn't as far along in the healing process as he is; she exhibits a rounder vulnerability that's less mired in philosophical questioning.

The men's gradual move from hesitance to trust is convincing in its force. Their friendship's evolving stages are awkward and tender at appropriate intervals. Wilson's arc develops alongside the book's shift from winter to spring, with its familiar note of rebirth. He's reinvigorated by the overtures of others. When he accepts an invitation to a holiday dinner and to a former student's classroom to give a guest lecture, the events open new possibilities.

Shifts in structure make the book disorienting. Changing perspectives, scenes with Wilson's East coast family (whose dialogue is set like a staged play), and a coda that features Wilson's memoir complicate the brimming work.

Suggesting that everything deserves attention, the book makes a provocative case for appreciating life's cumulative effects and imparts a sense that time is a gift that brings new ties in the wake of those that fray. The restorative nature of helping people is a natural process within the story, and reflections on the intersection of art and science highlight how similar the two lead characters are, despite their different reasons for pain.

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KAREN RIGBY (July 26, 2019)

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