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Shame Heirs

Anna Ilyina
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"HUMAN BEING is pathologically persistent in his yearning for unhappiness," writes Russian-born author Anna Ilyina.

And based on the characters she brings to life in *Shame Heirs,* it must be true. They succeed in finding unhappiness, despair, gloom, shame, and especially, hate in their relationships.

The allegorical characters—Madam and Monsieur, their offspring, Son and his pregnant wife, Girl—live dreary lives, despising each other and the work that they do. Meanwhile, Madam attempts to present them as normal, respectable people.

"We're cited as an example of the ideal family," Madam claims.

Under the "ideal" surface, Son is wimpy and impotent. Monsieur is the father of Girl's child and hates his office job. All but Son are having affairs. Despite yearning for love, they are incapable of rising above their unhappiness.

Son is a mama's boy, pampered and bathed by his mother even as an adult. He's ashamed of his obedience to her, as shame is also a burden for the others, including, eventually, the illegitimate child.

Both Monsieur and Madam are worried about aging and are preoccupied with their miserable lives. Son is distant. Girl and her unborn child are observers of life. The child, thought to be a boy when in the womb, has numerous philosophical monologues addressed to Mummy within the text. Actually a girl, the child is ejected by her mother at age 4 and develops a love-hate relationship with Mummy. And so the generational cycle of hate and anger continues.

Despite the darkness of the relationships, there are occasional moments of humor, such as when the well-connected, snobby Benefactress and her husband pay a visit to Madam and Monsieur's flat and then "pinch" various small items.

Girl's wanderings reveal the author's keen eye for detail as she relates an incident in the park. Girl silently watches when a woman is beaten by her thuggy companion, crawls to him and tries to kiss his knee: "The bashed woman felt intolerable pangs of shame as she was forced to be humiliated … Wounds on protoplasmic membrane can be healed or licked, but a soul is a completely different substance … that can't be patched up."

There is little plot to engage or move the characters to a crisis or change. Much of the action is after the fact, as they remember events or deal with the mundane. The heir's birth isn't even noteworthy. The most dramatic scenes come when Girl dreams of her own mother, and has a confrontation with her young child. Lack of plot also reinforces the quagmire in which the characters wallow.

The book's greatest stumbling block, however, is its tendency toward dense, sometimes incomprehensible sentences. For example: "Girl almost immediately, when it became possible, started to honour splendour and thought fashionable rags from a prestigious boutique to be worth genuflection and of falling into the next lowland, filled with stinking imperfection." In such instances, heavier editing could have streamlined the writing and made the meaning more clear.

Despite those shortcomings, the author has a creative flair that makes her characters nonetheless curiously engaging.

LINDA SALISBURY (August 9, 2011)

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