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Clarion Review ★★★☆☆ SHORT STORIES

The Bookseller

Peter Briscoe
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History and intrigue combine in the compelling short stories of The Bookseller.

Minor mysteries take center stage in Peter Briscoe's short story collection *The Bookseller*, which finds intrigue in the unsaid and the mundane and brings out the humanity of its characters.

The volume's slimness is deceptive: its shortest story is less than a full page long, and its longest is a novella. The two shortest stories, "One of Our Stars" and "A Girl in Colombia," focus on one character each; they are observed by others. In one, a professor is always on an adventure in pursuit of knowledge; in the other, a young woman hikes alone in a jungle park, and the shapeliness of her body is described. Both stories hint at a conflict that never materializes. In the former, the length is a barrier to understanding both the character and the story. In the latter, the focus on the young woman's body takes away from the sincere final statement, "Que Dios la proteja" ("May God protect her").

"After You, Please" centers on a man in a waiting room; it is a study in ambiguity. Questions about where the waiting room is, and whether the man has died or if someone has been injured, arise. On the surface, the story is about retirement and finding the time to complete delayed projects, only to realize that those projects were not pressing, or even necessarily interesting. When the man begins to ruminate on the possibility of life after death, the story changes, glimpsing at the enormity of time, and the wide expanse in which suppressed thoughts and emotions surface. The philosophical implications of the story's location and the title in context to the story result in a state of mind that lingers after the story ends—an interesting feat, for such a short piece.

The Bookseller" takes place in Ecuador. In it, rare books on church history are stolen, and an inspector calls a meeting with a head librarian because of this. The inspector receives an inch-thick packet listing the library's missing materials and sets out to find the thief. It seems to be an open and shut case: the books are traced to a small neighborhood bookshop. However, the case reopens when a rare book is cataloged by a university in the United States. This twist ending is foreshadowed by clever clues that hint at the true thief. Broad views on the changing natures of libraries, librarianship, and archives factor in, though descriptions of locations and the characters are sparse. The mystery of the book thefts dominates, and the reveal of the mastermind comes in classic form, via a letter to the inspector. The reveal is the most fascinating factor of the story; it reveals a motive more intellectual than criminal. The result is an engaging story about more than books, but about friendship and trust between two people who, otherwise, would never have crossed paths.

History and intrigue combine in the compelling short stories of *The Bookseller*, a slim collection containing only four stories that turns on the strengths of its longest entries.

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (June 8, 2021)

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