



★ **The Fifth Woman**

Nona Caspers

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The mundane becomes poetic in Nona Caspers's novel-in-vignettes, *The Fifth Woman*. Its atmosphere of grief is established with tight, beautiful prose.

An unnamed narrator who's lost her partner must grapple with her grief while also exploring nature, living in relative isolation, working a mind-numbing job, and trying to move on. Twenty-three intertwined micro-stories move from the unexpected death of her lover through her attempts to love again.

The narrator, who is also in the process of writing her thesis, alternates storytelling methods, moving between dreamy sequences that are almost entirely in her mind to memories that are more vivid than real life to the day-to-day details of her recovery.

The book is a feast of atmospheric details, including everything down to the physical attributes of the narrator's apartment. Her loss is not sentimentally dealt with; it is all the more devastating as a result. Her descriptions of working in a nearly-blank office generate an eerie sensation that her life has somewhat stopped as she grieves; the animals that she studies for her thesis create an interesting juxtaposition.

More than anything, the story is told with control. There are no wasted words. The text itself is a pleasure; its sparseness leaves room for imagination. Verb choices in particular convey the narrator's gut-wrenching emotions while demonstrating her ability to heal by connecting to the natural world's flora and fauna.

The shift in tone during the book's final story is intriguing and abrupt, with the final line of the book beautifully summing up what it means to love and fear love at the same time. While it lacks a neat or happy ending, the book's conclusion is realistic, complex, and moving.

LAURA LEAVITT (July/August 2018)

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