

The Ornatrrix

Kate Howard

The Overlook Press (Nov 15, 2016)

Hardcover \$27.95 (304pp)

978-1-4683-1382-6

Morbidly engrossing, the novel probes the lengths women go to in order to be seen as beautiful.

Kate Howard's *The Ornatrrix* is a dazzling exploration of the meaning and conveyance of feminine beauty.

Flavia lives with the blemish of a bird-shaped birthmark across her face. Under the weight of her mother's judgment, she is forced to hide away from most of the world, only allowed outside if she dons a hat with a veil to cover her blatant imperfection. When she ruins her sister's wedding dress out of spite, Flavia is banished by her family to the convent of Saint Guiliana.

There, she meets Ghostanza, a striking Venetian and a widowed courtesan who takes Flavia as her ornatrrix, her personal handmaid. She also introduces Flavia to cerussa, a white lead makeup that can erase her birthmark. Thus Flavia is drawn into the dark world of obsessive vanity, where she must come to terms with herself or risk drowning in vice.

Beauty and ugliness are contrasted throughout the novel, interspersed with historical recipes for drawing out female loveliness that, though they may be strange and laughable in modernity, illustrate the lengths that women have gone to to attain physical appeal. Caught up in such ritualistic masks, Flavia must confront the physical and emotional dangers of sharp concern with outward appearances.

In pursuit of the ultimate standard of beauty, characters often become twisted. Once-innocent Flavia uncovers a wiliness in herself through the influence of Il Sicofante, the apothecary. Sweet Gilia, Ghostanza's step-daughter, is also not all she is on the surface, and though Flavia's mother is far too poor to indulge in the coveted cerussa, she imposes her own harsh ceremonies to remove Flavia's embarrassing mark. Only Vitale, a kindly doctor, seems to escape being bent, serving as a possible avenue of salvation.

At times morbidly engrossing, *The Ornatrrix* is a powerful testament to both the wonders and pitfalls of feminine identity when entwined with ever-shifting perceptions of beauty.

MEAGAN LOGSDON (Winter 2017)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. No fee was paid by the publisher for this review. Foreword Reviews only recommends books that we love. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.