

The Oxygen Tank

Jonathan Harnisch

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A fascinating book that raises questions about the meaning of self and relationships, and is a unique look at love.

Hallucinatory and complex, *The Oxygen Tank* by Jonathan Harnisch delves deeply into an imaginary couple whose relationship's consequences are all too real.

Ben Schreiber lives halfway in a dream-world of schizophrenic hallucinations. Some are tortured, some bizarre, and all are centered on his dream woman, Claudia Nesbitt. In them, Ben's alter ego, Georgie Gust, engages in an endless pursuit of his beloved, only for their relationship to shatter again and again. Through every possible scenario, including abuse and death and sex, Ben chases Georgie chasing Claudia, always seeking an answer to his own inner turmoil.

The book is a series of fantasies, each one involving various stages of the relationship between Georgie and Claudia. Throughout, it is unclear whether Claudia herself actually exists. Judging by Georgie's earlier experiences at Wakefield Prep School, as told in Harnisch's novel *Freak*, Claudia may be a manifestation of a young woman whose suicide left a deep impression on Georgie. It is possible to read into the book that the relative orderliness of the real, doomed Claudia's life in comparison to Georgie's may be the source of his guilt. He seems as obsessed with his disorder as he is lost in would-bes and fantasies.

Whether she's real, based on reality, or completely imaginary, Claudia is unattainable. Even when Georgie tries to literally objectify her by turning her likeness into a wax sculpture, she shatters his equilibrium and frustrates his intentions, evading his control without even trying. In this way, Claudia represents Ben's schizophrenia, a simultaneously beguiling and excruciating experience that can give him nothing real by definition.

The book's examination of the characters of Georgie and Claudia is unrelenting, and several other characters reappear regularly in Ben's hallucinations, but Ben himself is only an observer. Despite this, he is the only character who evolves throughout the book. Georgie simply repeats the same mistakes over and over again, and Claudia is essentially an archetype. But, then again, neither of them is real. This subtle difference helps to give the book, and Ben's struggle to understand his own complicated mind, greater weight.

The book's use of a preceding synopsis is a bit of a spoiler for the development of each hallucination, often revealing what might have been better left to discovery. However, the synopsis is easily skippable, and the chaos of the book's structure is a far greater pleasure. Evoking the currents and eddies of Ben's mind, the book seems to forcibly pull Georgie away from happiness at every turn, emphasizing his lack of control over his situation.

The Oxygen Tank is an interesting, even fascinating book that raises questions about the meaning of self and relationships. In all respects, it is a unique look at love. Fans of Harnisch's other work will appreciate this, which may be among his best work, and those looking for a break from run-of-the-mill literary fiction would be well advised to take a look.

ANNA CALL (March 9, 2016)

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