

★ **The Portrait****Ilaria Bernardini**

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In Ilaria Bernardini's artful novel *The Portrait*, Valeria is an author who needs a jacket picture for her new collection. This becomes her excuse to enter the house where her secret lover lays dying; there, his wife, Isla, will paint Valeria's portrait. Between sittings, Valeria and Isla discuss their lives, travels, work, and love, reaching something like understanding.

Comprised of short vignettes that move in swift, restless succession, the novel addresses the past and the present alongside one another, so that time becomes a spiral that closes in on itself. Memories of Valeria's departed sister haunt the narrative, and Valeria's stories are included throughout.

The characters are developed as mirrors and refractions of one other, especially as Valeria and Isla study one another during the portraiture. Several echo the refrain that "everyone is everyone." But even as they verge on becoming facets of one universal character, they retain their individuality: Valeria is elusive; Martin, her lover, bears his twin brother's pain; Isla can't be alone; and Isla's angsty teenage daughter runs away, resulting in a climactic, desperate search for her across London.

As the characters tangle, their story becomes desperate, even claustrophobic. In conversation, they are afraid to reveal themselves, answering questions with questions and changing subjects. The world beyond them is seen in glimpses: of inner-city depravities, refugees in Aleppo, and hyper workout videos. This is a threatening backdrop to their precarious work toward being authentic and seeing others for who they truly are. Valeria and Isla's unlikely relationship is an alternative: by melding the ghosts of their pasts, their stories, and their anxious, intimate scenes pierce the heart, reaching beyond solipsism to find healing and hope.

*The Portrait* is a meditative, illuminating novel that pushes the boundaries of love and art.

MARI CARLSON (January / February 2021)

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