ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

The Rules of Play
Jennie Walker
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In Jennie Walker's The Rules of Play, everything's a game. From cricket, card tricks, and crossword puzzles, to motherhood, marriage, adultery, and cooking, each conversation and every action is narrated play-by-play, with special attention paid to those who break the rules. The narrator is the unnamed wife of Alan, stepmother of teenage Selwyn, and mother figure (albeit neglectful) for Agnieszka, the live-in nanny. She is also the lover of a man known only to the reader by his profession, the "loss-adjuster" (pun intended). The novella takes place in London over a five-day period coinciding with a cricket test match between England and India, which everyone-from Agnieszka to the gypsy who plays card tricks on the street-follows intently.

The narrator, amidst her various trials (teenage son gone missing, torrid love affair, loveless marriage) is learning, perhaps by willful distraction, the elusive and complicated rules of the game for the first time. She becomes obsessed with the various players' roles and begins to recognize their traits everywhere she looks: on her way to the tube station she encounters several homeless people dressed in tatters, and can't help comparing them to "retired umpires down on their luck, still encumbered with the cast-off jumpers of bowlers who have worked up a sweat and then forgotten to retrieve them." Whether this is a play on the obsessive nature of British cricket fans or not, the quirky thread that weaves throughout the book—often updating the reader on the current score—works to lighten the protagonist's load, which grows heavier and ever more complicated as the days wear on.

CB Editions originally published the book in England under the title 24 for 3 in a very publishing 2.0 mode-print on demand, financed by the author himself. If that pronoun surprises you, "Jennie Walker" is actually a pseudonym used here by Charles Boyle, author of several books of poetry. Readers can hear the poet behind Jennie Walker, especially in the careful observations of place: the London underground, the lovers' pied-Ã -terre, and the relatively stifling and hostile household of a failed marriage. Fans of Joseph O'Neill's Netherland will like this fun, fraught, and risqué tale-and could probably finish it in a single afternoon, between

innings. (January) Kara Mason