

The Universe in Miniature in Miniature

Patrick Somerville

featherproof books (November 2010)

Softcover \$14.95 (308pp)

978-0-9825808-1-3

In *The Universe in Miniature in Miniature*, novelist Patrick Somerville offers a collection of short stories that transports readers into electrified landscapes of the mind. Eclectic and edgy, these fifteen stories range widely in subject matter and style, obsessing over the delicious details of existence—reality, love, purpose, and meaning—through the perspectives of refreshingly morose, erratic, and often unstable characters.

These characters are often amusing, their idiosyncrasies intriguing, even charming; they are what keep the stories rumbling with energy from page to page. In “The Wildlife Biologist,” for example, readers encounter Courtney, a young girl who finds herself drawn to her science teacher soon after the separation of her parents. Though at the surface the plotline seems simplistic, even cliché—a vulnerable girl crushing on her high school teacher—Courtney’s sharp assessment of her parent’s relationship and scathingly honest realizations about her teacher lace the story with dark undertones, lending it a complexity that sets it apart and makes it a thrilling read.

The collection ranges from character-driven short stories that are perhaps realist in style and execution, to imaginative—even whimsical—exploits that bend reality and happily leave it behind. While this mix offers variety, it also works cohesively as a unit. “Hair University,” the strange, desperate tale of a man’s desire to belong, and “People Like Me,” a chilling look into a mercenary’s mind, are both eerily outlandish depictions of the human psyche, but also work as realistic representations of the intensity of human emotion.

Since these stories snap comfortably into the genre of speculative fiction and are exploratory by definition, it is easy to assume that they somehow escape into a world of imaginative fancy. Though all of these stories compel the reader to accept what cannot be, they are rooted in a deep understanding of human commonality and connection. Somerville’s premise is that humans—and aliens for that matter—have moments of realization, extreme anger, vulnerability, and desperation that are not unique. These moments make what happens in fictive worlds relatable in real life. An award-winning fiction writer, Somerville’s ability to depict times that are heartbreakingly familiar, but difficult to pinpoint and express, serves as one of the major strengths of this book.

The Universe in Miniature in Miniature will appeal to lovers of contemporary fiction as well as readers who have a penchant for speculative fiction. This original and exciting collection will certainly be a welcome addition to public and private bookshelves this season.

SHOILEE KHAN (January / February 2011)

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