

What Counts as Love

Marian Crotty

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These voices possess a fragile resilience even as they surrender themselves to fate, new knowledge, and other bodies.

Adolescents and adults on the brink of critical self-awareness define *What Counts as Love*, winner of the John Simmons Short Fiction Award. With heartrending clarity, Marian Crotty explores sexuality, abuse, dependency, endless hope, and other facets of love. Nine provocative stories wind through lives under pressure, revealing the moments before they're altered.

For all its darkness, the collection is rooted in empathy for vulnerable women. It includes a college applicant who discovers a way to begin freeing herself from her suicidal mother; a young woman in recovery from an eating disorder, whose newfound acknowledgment of her own lesbianism is complicated by her sense of invisibility; an impulsive student who marries a Muslim and realizes what it means to love with deliberation; a grieving mother, whose marriage is reshaped by a move abroad; and a girl who witnesses her neighbor's rape.

No matter the specifics of their problems, each shares a background marked by isolation. Their lonely existences reveal how tough exteriors mask helplessness, and how those who only seem helpless discover the extent of their own strength.

The notable exception, "The House Always Wins," amplifies terror and lust. Here, a male poet-in-residence at an elite high school finds himself living in a bizarre Forever Home housing development, where luxury homes designed to withstand and extinguish their own fires nevertheless burn.

Against the spectacle of homes plagued by false advertising, a raw story of mutual need unfolds. The poet's involvement with a woman who cannot love him unfolds in passionate scenes; the combustible homes turn into a metaphor for uncontrollable forces and dreams laid to waste. Fantastic as elements in the story are, they highlight everyday treacheries.

Characters search for connection and fail. They settle for substitutes, weigh themselves against standards set by others, and look for meaning when the future seems uncertain. Yet, despite the suggestion of minds being hardened by repeated painful experiences, these voices possess a fragile resilience even as they surrender themselves to fate, new knowledge, and other bodies.

What Counts as Love brilliantly examines where the seams of people's lives begin to fray, leaving a poignant ellipsis for how they'll be remade.

KAREN RIGBY (Debut Fiction 2017)

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