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Gems from a master writer

246

PEOPLE I WANTED TO BE

By Gina Ochsner
Portobello Books, €11.65

REVIEWED BY
JACQUELINE BURTON

This collection of 11 short stories is crafted around the experiences the author had while travelling in eastern Europe. It is the follow-up to Ochsner's debut collection, *The Necessary Grace to Fall*, which garnered the author many awards when published in the US.

The stories have grown from Ochsner's speculation regarding the lives of the people she saw while sitting in cafes and watching the world go by. This premise in itself is intriguing, but does little to prepare the reader for the standard of excellence within the book's cover.

This is a work of which Ochsner must be extremely proud, and these are not ordinary stories. Each one has been lovingly crafted by a literary mind that is sharp and experienced in the genre.

Dripping with atmosphere and drenched in suspense, Ochsner toys with her reader's expectation and delivers a world that is a fractured version of our own reality.

Set in Russia and the US, her stories reek of Slavic fatalism woven with Oregon stoicism, and are heavily weighted with religious

themes – such as the idea that we must let go of past baggage and an ever-present obsession with death and the afterlife.

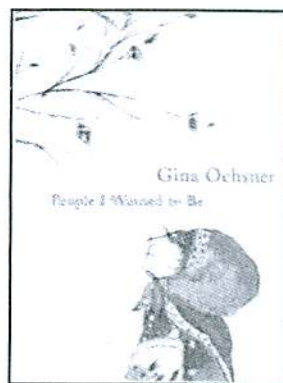
No one story is what it seems. The reader is left to ponder every ending and extrapolate the meaning within. This literary device sees the reader sucked insidiously into Ochsner's landscape until they begin to live the story, as if it were happening to them inside their own mind.

Reality is a fragile thing in Ochsner's world, and this creates tension and uncertainty for each of the characters. Like a procession from a freak show, we meet the lonely woman who builds 'The Hurler', firstly to get rid of her dead parents' possessions and, finally, to rid herself of her own heart as she has it ripped still beating from her body.

Then follows the alcoholic teacher who takes on a class from the afterlife; the couple who live with the ghosts of the children they never had; a twin sister who recounts her experience of life in a funeral home.

From the man who buys a mynah bird in a vain effort "to calm our tumultuous marriage", to the spectre of the old woman watching her own autopsy after she has been released from her body by a vicious murder, each of these strange individuals brings a lesson in life.

Some of the stories are positively frightening. Meet the spirit called Niels who com-



municates with a father and son using a tape recorder and cine camera. Their relationship, and Niels's tales, begin friendly enough: "It was that time of the year when the nights were so short that a man standing in Saturday could shake hands with a man in Sunday."

But as the recipients begin to resent his intrusion into their lives and to become obsessed with him in equal measure, Niels's stories become more difficult to listen to:

"I thought of tweezers, of splinters. Every inch of my skin itched. Is this how it ends, I wondered, feeling your own diminishment as it gains upon it?"

Gradually, the extent to which the family are smothering their grief over the deaths of the mother and older son becomes apparent, and as they deal with this, Niels fades away.

Each of the stories has a dreamlike quality poised on the cusp of nightmares. This results in a constant state of confusion and bewilderment.

The prose is beautifully drawn, pulling powerful and emotive responses from the characters and readers alike.

Ochsner is a master storyteller and has produced a collection of gems that can be read and re-read, giving up a different reaction and interpretation every time.