



*Gina Ochsner of Keizer has won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction.*

Special to the Statesman Journal

A man buys a mynah bird hoping it will help his marriage. Twins learn that sometimes connections must involve death. A sad substitute teacher learns a horrifying truth.

Listen to this:

"I placed my palm over my sternum and pressed until I could feel my heart. I took a deep breath, stuck my fingers down my throat, and removed it, as neat as you please, and placed it on the hurler. It wasn't broken, not badly, or terribly wounded — no more so than the average thirty-something-year-old woman's heart."

Many of the stories here are set in Eastern Europe, drawn from the mythology of that area, or involve characters descended from there. But the themes and stories are universal, the people recognizable. We want to meet Ochsner's people, we want to comfort them, sometimes we want to be them — no matter the terrible cost. Crime-scene investigators so obsessed with their

work that it becomes their life, an artist whose art fights him, a dog that surely can't be of this world — all of them inhabit this book.

And all of them, perhaps even the dog, watch, in Ochsner's words, "... watch for the possibility of grace..."

"People I Wanted to Be" contains living, breathing stories by a writer of extraordinary skill and talent. Ochsner sees things the rest of us only dream about, and she knows how to lead us all down the right paths. These stories will become a part of you.

"It wasn't perfect," Ochsner writes in "Halves of a Whole," "but then, nothing ever was in the end; not people, not the things they said or the promises they uttered, not the plans they made."

She is wrong there. Some things in this world can be perfect. Like a short story by Gina Ochsner.

---

*Dan Hays' Northwest Best recommends a book written by a Northwest author or about a Northwest subject. Write Hays in care of the Statesman Journal, P.O. Box 13009, Salem, OR 97309-3009.*