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FICTION

Ochsner, Gina

PEOPLE I WANTED TO BE:

Stories

Mariner/Houghton Mifflin

(192 pp.)

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Elegantly unsettling fiction by Flannery O'Connor Award winner Ochsner (*The Necessary Grace to Fall, 2002*), who charts some strange goings-on within emigrant communities.

There's a touch of the darkly magical in stories like "Articles of Faith." Set on the Finnish-Karelian border, it shows three miscarried children coming to haunt the awkward, ten-year-old union of Russian Irina and Finnish Evin. The desire for a child haunts another couple's relationship in "A Blessing." Siberian expatriates Vera and Nikolai, now living in western Oregon, adopt a dog in the hopes it will teach them about caring for the children they plan to have. But Vera is suspicious of the unusual-looking Shura, who reminds her of the forsaken wilds of Siberia. After a windfall of riches suddenly arrives in their lives and she becomes pregnant, Vera insists on getting rid of the dog, whose pale eyes reflect a landscape "she'd spent her whole life trying to get away from." Another aspect of Russia shadows the Czech street-worker who narrates "Signs and Markings." He ponders his nation's sad history of occupations (most recently by the Soviet Union) as he tells of his love for a politically correct nurse who already has a child and doesn't want another. When she finally leaves him, he must surrender the notion that happiness is about procreation and embrace the unremarkable life within his reach. In the chilling "A Darkness Held," sadistic Sister Clement has been pushed by her students down a metal staircase outside the school where she has taught for ages. Recovering alcoholic Imogene McCrary, at 38 still bearing psychic wounds the nun inflicted on her as a schoolgirl, agrees reluctantly to teach the class in her former teacher's absence. Imogene's young charges react to the bad news with a verbal shrug: "Is this going to be on the test? Because . . . we always talk about essential mysteries on Wednesdays." Ochsner's keen eye for the macabre is frequently evident here.

Eleven stories that possess restraint and edge: a powerful combination. (Agent: Julie Barer/Sanford J. Greenburger Associates)