



Signs and Wonders

Alix Ohlin

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These sixteen stories by the much-celebrated Alix Ohlin illuminate the connections between all of us—connections we choose to break, those broken for us, and those we find and make in spite of ourselves.

Signs and Wonders Details

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From Reader Review Signs and Wonders for online ebook

Mary says

I picked up this book before I left Canada. I had \$20 in Indigo rewards and thirty minutes to spend it. I've been meaning to read Alix Ohlin since I listened to her on-line interview with Sarah Selecky (whom I love!), and *Signs and Wonders* was a great choice. I loved the author's conversational tone and the unexpected touch of humor in her stories. A brilliant collection that I'm glad to own - I will definitely read this book again.

M says

I feel anxiety that verges on physical pain when I leave a book unfinished and yet I can't possibly devote myself to *Signs and Wonders*. It was just blah...middle aged divorcees aplenty, the stresses of daily existence, and generally disappointing plot turns pepper this collection with unlikable characters and generally boring stories.

Laura Frey (Reading in Bed) says

3.5. Almost DNFd but the last couple stories were really strong.

A'ndrea (Auni) says

Very interesting book I have to say. It left me thinking more about each short story. There are 16 total, and none of them end the way you think it should. Sometimes the author leaves you hanging to decide your ending. My outcomes are usually of the happy nature. Nice change of reading. I would recommend it for sure.

Karen says

Piercing short stories about connections. It's a wonderfully written collection of stories with much insight into the human condition. In just a few pages, the author draws you completely into the characters. It captured me with its beauty and poignancy....very enjoyable read with a bittersweet tint to it, recommend it!

Angie Gazdziak says

When I started reading this, the first short story was (in my opinion) stunningly beautiful. I didn't necessarily read them in order, but the first three I read were wonderful and I couldn't put them down. I finished the remainder on a flight out to LA a few months ago, and ultimately, they didn't hold my interest as much as I

would have liked. They seemed very formulaic, and I found myself skimming some of them instead of reading closely as I wanted to.

Anittah says

I'd never have heard of this writer, who apparently teaches not-so-far from where I live, had it not been for an essay, written by my husband, published today:

<http://www.full-stop.net/2012/12/10/f...>

(Recommended read if you are interested in writing, reading, critics, literature, elitism, Goodreads, etc.)

Joanne Guidoccio says

I agree with the reviewers who described this collection of sixteen short stories as a gift. And I would also describe the stories as gifts of unexpected love, love that does not appear in its usual wrappers.

While Alix Ohlin's conflicted characters are struggling to make sense of their relationships, they are surprised to discover love in situations they thought they would never choose or even welcome into their lives.

In the title story, the protagonist suddenly realizes she hates her husband of 26 years. Ready to divorce him, an unfortunate accident turns her well-orchestrated life upside down, forcing her to face the prospect of tending him indefinitely.

While sitting in a hospital waiting room with her daughter and the second wife, a divorced woman discovers she still has feelings for her ex-husband.

Reena agrees to accompany her aunt on "The Cruise," a post-divorce ritual that unleashes a torrent of feelings.

After connecting with the one who got away in "Who Do You Love?" Janet re-examines all her relationships and reaches an unexpected conclusion.

Alix Ohlin is gifted storyteller with an amazing eye for detail. Some of my favorite descriptions...

"She'd gotten married in a flurry of sex and promises, wearing a white dress so hideously confectionery that she felt like a parody of herself, a joke told in crinoline and lace, and even that made her happy, because it was silly and she knew they'd laugh about it later."

"Our boss, Eric, was an elderly bohemian who wore pilled woolen cardigans and too-short pants, and spent afternoons in his office reading manuscripts while twirling his beard between his thumb and index finger, making a little curl that stood out from his chin. By five o'clock his beard would be a tufted mess of curls, all fluffed out like the feathers of some preening bird. Because of this, Sarah and I called him the titmouse."

Deborah says

Captivating. I ordered this book not realizing it was a collection of short stories which I usually do not enjoy as much as a novel, but this collection definitely changed my mind. The characters were fully developed and as lovable or detestable in short story form as they could ever be in a novel. Sometimes funny, sometimes sad, but always poignant, the stories capture people in relationships showing our human need for intimacy and companionship even when lacking the skills to make it work. I would love to read more by this author.

Susanna says

yes!

Karen, I finished two weeks ago--very nice. Do you know Lori Moore? I recently got part of the way through the Ann Beattie New Yorker collection, but I needed a break for something more hopeful, but they are also worth the effort.

AND short short readers should know about the New Yorker fiction podcasts--pretty spectacular and free!

Superstition Review says

Alix Ohlin understands human emotions, even those of young men, war veterans, miserable middle-aged married women, and stepmothers trying to belong. But Ohlin proves through her piercingly honest writing that she knows the same emotions are present within all of us. She shines a spotlight on the vulnerability and fragility, the resilience and hope beneath our outer shells.

Ohlin connects these people so different from each other by the most crushing emotion – loss. And yet, there is always an element of hope in her stories: hope for the unknown, the unlikely, or the uncertain, and also the new connections that loss will create. “There was the death of hope and then the beginning of it, and sometimes in her memory she could no longer separate the two.”

Through the story of a married couple whose connection is threatened, Ohlin concludes, “They hadn’t said: *I will ask you for things no person should ask*. Or: *I will hurt you so much it will suck you dry*. What they’d said was: *I will love you forever. And every word of it was true.*”

In Ohlin’s title story, a woman who discovers she is miserable is tested when her soon to be ex-husband lies trapped in a coma. Ohlin uses images of birds to highlight both the caging of a soul and the freedom it longs to have. Her characters are delicate and fierce like birds, and they question their fragile existence: “she could feel them all around her, the questions of her life, at times beating like wings, at times soaring cleanly through the air, and she could only wonder how it was that she had never felt them before.”

By Rikki Lux

Sandra says

There is something about these stories that kept me reading until I finished the entire collection. I know it is best to read short stories in small doses and let them simmer and I usually do this. There were different: I just kept saying one more until there were no more left. There are sixteen stories altogether. (To be Added to)

Tamsen says

I forgot to review this one - I must have been in a hurry to return it. It's unfortunate as I know I enjoyed a lot of these and had wanted to bookmark a few quotes.

My favorites (I think!) were the title story "Signs and Wonders," "A Month of Sundays," "The Cruise," "The Assistants, and "Bruno."

Stephanie Flood says

Signs and Wonders by Alice Ohlin portrays succinct, crisp fiction writing that peers into conflicting, dysfunctional relationships occasionally seen in contemporary literature, puppeteering basic, flawed archetypes in current settings, that a wide audience can relate to. The stories navigate through relationships like broken marriages, love affairs with under-age children and a lack-luster partnership gone sour. These really set the stage for mediocrity with a twist. The twists tend to be formed through offbeat actions that affect the characters, driving the plot with a chisel and hammer, propelling the story along, line-by-line.

Don't expect to have room for imagination or getting lost in the art of thick, dripping metaphors like in Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad. Ohlin's writing just doesn't embellish. The art of the short story is also something to consider, and what Ohlin does do is offer simplicity that can be refreshing, especially to those who read massive experimental or simply awful writing. The story-construction neatly implants a beginning, middle and ending, and finishes, often times with a summery, that enacts a "moral of a story" or reveals what happens to the characters. This is a style that can be appreciated and abhorred, since it gives the meaning with more articulation than what the writing craft can supply with the use of more artistic or experimental prose. What makes this writing so pronounced is that it uses the basic devices of story-telling {i.e. it is what it is}, so that the words become a device that sheds light on the subtleties suggested in characters, plot, and juxtapositions of conflicts, illuminating by not defining, even as Ohlin reveals summaries.

Meaning is preserved well with this functional, competent prose, especially as it dives into darker, complex issues like self-denial, obsession, and tragedy. The writing invites the strangeness that hum in the drone of mundane human connections, roping in more profound points with themes: eventuality, destruction, moral decay, freedom and death, hope, and insanity. Back to back, the stories display common similarities that may show familiar threads, relationships mainly and failed ones at that, but if you read slowly, from line to line, offbeat insight pours past the surface of clichés. By reading slower, putting the book down, and giving space for it to breath, the stories give a side-ways look at the fibers woven in our lives.

Drama plays, viewed from these complex, wounded and inadequate characters that show vulnerability. Like

Alan in Forks, he asks: “You know how if you look at a word too long, you can’t tell if it’s a real word? I couldn’t even tell the difference between sand and the sky.” The composed lines in the final paragraph of this story may repel others who don’t like to be spoon fed literary tools, but Tom, the main character, reflects on this when he’s still in a relationship with Stephanie, as he isn’t able to tell which was up or down, so the ending goes. This seems to indirectly explain the dilemma and solution to a problem that was never directly stated in the story, only shown with plays-by-play scenes, to produce the coils of a lack-luster relationship. This story is a great example of how the writing is an aid but not a pain, exposing the in-between stages of a successful relationship and stagnancy that happens over time, deliberately sedating the usual passion that a person has when in a prized relationship, and it’s this trained hand, that keeps the story crisp, saving the reader of abstractions and verbosity.

It is the gravity alone that is spindled by the art of short stories. The challenge is how to pull through the arcs of character and plot in a brief way without losing the reader. Writing is vulnerable in front of a demanding crew of literary enthusiasts when it’s too simple, seemingly plain or aren’t taking the flashy risks seen today. Stories can be good or bad, but what really matters, is what is discovered in the process of reading it. I discovered a lot with Ohlin’s Signs and Wonders. I was satisfied with all that it was, and wasn’t. Plain and simple.

Joseph Pfeffer says

Alix Ohlin has the uncanny ability to make you feel you know her characters as though you've read a whole novel about them, though in fact you've read just two or three paragraphs. By the time you get to the end of a story, you've got the entire arc of the character's life. You know her (most of her main characters are female, thought there are striking exceptions) in a way that you know everything that will happen to her. How far she'll go in fulfilling her wishes, desires, dreams. What she'll do to undercut herself, no matter how good things may look. The other thing that is so strong about these stories is Ohlin's use of detail. In every story, she gives telling accents that let you know she's writing about this particular person and no one else in the world. The interactions between characters are equally unique and vivid. Every interaction has quirks that tell the reader this could only happen between these two people at this particular time in this particular place. Ohlin creates suspense not by building up to some catastrophic event, but by showing how her characters react to such events, which take place near the beginning. The most striking of these is The Teacher, where a grieving young widower reacts to the death of his wife in ways entirely unexpected yet entirely believable. Other times the events are more subtle. In Bruno, a man discovers what it means to be a father when his son, against all the man's wishes, decides he's going to live with him instead of his mother. In other stories people react to unexpected pregnancies, infertility, the disappearance of a son in ways that define who they are and give the reader the sense of a complete life unfolding in a few pages. Signs and Wonders is a brilliant collection by one of our most gifted young writers, Alix Ohlin has proven herself as adept with long fiction (Inside) as with short. There is a sense that her career is still in its early stages, and that what she will give us in the future will be more endlessly surprising tales, told with breathtaking richness in the language of the heart.
