

# OHIOana QUARTERLY

Fall 2015 | VOL. 58 NO. 4

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Collecting, Preserving, and Celebrating Ohio Literature

**Sun, Anna. *Dreamers of the Absolute: A Book of Hours*.**

Sylph Editions (London, UK) 2014. PB \$21.00.

When are we in love? How do we know when someone loves us back? Love can be slippery, cloudy, and more often than not cliché when it's described in writing. However, Anna Sun's most recent work of fiction provides a sharp look at why we feel the need to pin down exactly what defines "love." In a forward-flowing stream of memories, dreams, and internal dialogue, *Dreamers of the Absolute* acknowledges that love itself can be complicated by who we are, what we want, and what we believe in.



Rose sleeps with the light on. This is something she has always done when she is alone, but especially on her first night in a Trappist monastery in rural Kentucky. She has surrendered to a retreat where a sign in the sunroom reads 'Silence is Spoken Here' and where the daily prayer routine provides structure. Monks move about the Abbey Church, heads down and focused, making Rose uncomfortable because she grew up with no religious experience.

She has committed to this retreat to see her older brother Leo, her last living relative. After not hearing from him for months, Rose learns that Leo has committed himself to the monastery as a novice. Throughout her life Rose has struggled with why Leo does not like to share his thoughts or emotions. He has broken his girlfriend's heart, leaving her in confusion and tears, and never returned her or Rose's letters. Rose wonders, why hasn't their love been enough for him?

Rose is caught between chasing her brother's love and running from David, a man she has been seeing but is uncertain whether or not it is "love." David's presence is described in several scenes in the piece, the most notable taking the form of two opera tickets folded inside one of his books. Should she phone him and go to the opera with him? What does it mean if she takes that step? The tickets remain nestled in the book pages in Rose's desk, waiting to be answered.

This novella's poetic language draws us into Rose's dreams and imagination. We fall confusingly for David and question his purpose in her life: "She closed her eyes, but she could still feel him standing there—his presence was no longer a visual one, but a physical one as well; he had changed the consistency and weight of the air in the room."

Sun's work is sharp. The narrow white pages are interspersed with black and white photographs by London-based artist Bee Flowers. The photos are from a series in which Flowers contemplates the complex relationship between individual and culture. The intense-looking human statues mimic the religious statues found in places of worship. Their placement in the novella is strong and striking, the empty holes in the female torso symbolizing the emptiness we feel and the questions we pursue.

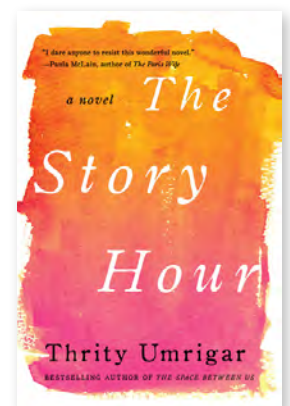
Light and heavy at the same time, I would recommend this book not only for those who enjoy experimental fiction, but also those who find themselves deeply engrossed in lengthy novels. Like Rose in the Abbey, a reader may enter Sun's work confused and with his or her own preconceptions. Once those slip away, we realize that Rose is relatable and human. Those who prefer longer works can use this novella as their own retreat, reflecting on disorienting dreams and what they mean. Its short length works perfectly to tackle heavy topics without plunging too far into darkness. When you awake in the middle of the night, how do you know what is real and what is imagined?

REVIEWED BY ELLEN MCDEVITT-STREDNEY

**Umrigar, Thrity. *The Story Hour*.**

Harper (New York, NY) 2014. HC \$25.99.

Every week on her day off, Lakshmi takes two buses across town to Maggie's house where, for an hour, the two women sit in Maggie's home office. They sit as patient and doctor, they sit as friends, and they sit trying to make sense of the other's story, eventually learning to take nothing for granted about each other. Author Thrity Umrigar brings us to this intimate





crossroads of culture, personality, and psychology in *The Story Hour*, in which Lakshmi, an immigrant from India who tried to commit suicide, tells Maggie, a psychologist assigned to her case, her story.

Maggie and Lakshmi are worlds apart. In Lakshmi's eyes, Maggie has a perfect life that includes weekly visits to the pool, a loving husband who is a passionate and dedicated professor, and a house that sits on a hill in an enviable neighborhood. Lakshmi, appearing first to Maggie as a helpless and innocent victim of circumstances, is in a loveless marriage with a husband whose nickname for her is "Stupid" and who brought her to the United States promising more than he had to give. Lakshmi works long hours for no pay in her husband's restaurant and lives in the cramped upstairs apartment. Before meeting Maggie and before attempting suicide, Lakshmi passed miserable days in the restaurant hoping to see one of her regular customers, a kind and courteous man she believed to be her best friend, although their interactions were limited to what took place in the restaurant. It was his departure to California that pushed her to attempt suicide.

Slowly, Maggie begins to bring Lakshmi into her world by allowing, and occasionally demanding, that she become more independent from her husband. Maggie teaches Lakshmi how to drive and helps her find work as a cleaner and caterer with her upper-crust friends. During the story hour, Lakshmi and Maggie begin to see the things they have in common despite the surface differences: both lost their mothers while still young and both had challenging childhoods mired in poverty, confusion, and hurt. Both had to face the challenges that accompany a woman as she grows. Both are still coming to terms with decisions they've made and those that have been made for them. Both are married to Indian men and have personal connections to the subcontinent—connections that are disrupted and reinforced throughout the novel. Driving the book, and our heroines' relationship, are the moments when each woman begins to understand that the other is not as she seems.

From this hour, an uncertain and tenuous friendship blossoms. This is a friendship in which each woman can see herself in the other, which is sometimes reassuring and sometimes challenging. It is a friendship that Maggie fights for fear of violating her code of ethics,

but also one she nurtures against her better judgment because she knows that, more than anything, Lakshmi needs a friend. It is a friendship that Lakshmi walks into willingly, almost forcefully, upon seeing that Maggie's husband appreciates her cooking and that her own marriage improves because of Maggie.

At its core, *The Story Hour* is a story about stories: the stories we tell ourselves, the stories we tell others, the ones we hide, the ones we wear, and the ones we come to believe or not.

REVIEWED BY MAGGIE ARGIRO

## YOUNG ADULT

### Corp, Carey, and Lorie Langdon. *Doon*.

Blink (Grand Rapids, MI) 2013. HC \$17.99.

Best friends Veronica and Mackenna were separated when Mackenna's family moved away. When Mackenna inherits a Scottish cottage from her great-aunt, she invites Veronica to spend the summer with her, and their adventures begin.

Veronica, who is in need of a change of scenery due to boyfriend and family problems, is ready to explore her new environment, especially when she learns about the legendary world of Doon. With the use of magical rings and a letter left by Mackenna's great-aunt, the two girls cross a mystical bridge and enter a fairytale world complete with a castle, magic, and two princes. When these two modern-day teenagers arrive in Doon, chaos begins. Witches and evil are a part of this land, and the girls are continually questioned about their reason for being in Doon. Will Veronica and Mackenna survive? Will they have to live in Doon forever? Will this novel be a true fairy tale and end with a happily ever after?



*Doon* is an exciting read, filled with lots of adventure that forces the reader to finish just one more chapter before putting the book down. The chapters are divided by main character perspectives, written either from