The Man in the Sepia Photographs: A Collection of Published Short Stories

By Jules A Riley
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Reviewed by Christos Kalli

I think I partly knew I would be reading great short stories from the title of Jules A Riley's The Man in the Sepia Photographs. The title forced me to reminisce a different time, perhaps even, a freer time, when people took sepia photographs and saved them, despite their deficiency in colour and tone. I was proven right almost immediately; the stories I encountered, starting with the impeccable 'One Day of the Year,' are frequently driven by a dialogue that keeps you on edge, and is itself always on the edge. In the aforementioned story, Riley utilizes the very little space that a 'short story' provides for him, and immediately sparks an intrigue with a dialogue that can only be described as quickened and fresh:

'Bet you pawned it for a fix.'
'I am clean.'
'I am a nun.'

(One Day of the Year)

Like in this example, the language is uncomplicated throughout the collection, although it should not be mistaken as shallow or inattentive to meaning. It denied for me, its reader, the right to be passive, and it was asking a persistent attention.

More so, it was asking an emotional reaction, and with me, it was very successful in securing it. If I had to identify a consistent thematic element throughout the stories it would be the interest in familial bonds, and the strong elegiac quality that moves the majority of the stories. In the title story, Riley is able to eternalize a moment, which is something I've seldom witnessed. As here for instance:

'The young man sat on the edge of the bed, squeezed out a flannel and washed his great-uncle's bone-sharpened face. With a mere flutter the sick man opened his sunken eyes then closed them again.'

(The Man in Sepia Photographs)

The ability to extend a memory from a singular instance into a succession of actions and layers of emotions is characteristic of good elegiac literature. Riley succeeds in doing that through crafted language and emotionally charged imagery.

A Sinful Thought, the story of a wife taking care of her sick husband, stood out for me. The immediacy in Riley's use of past tense is striking and his masterful use of third person description will make a lasting impression. Maybe even leave an emotional scar.

'The silence of her ministrations broken by Henri's phlegm-rattled breathing.'

(A Sinful Thought)

I can write a lot more about this collection of short stories. Equally so, I can read it a lot more times. It was easy to lose myself in it the first time, and with each reading, it was becoming easier.

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