

*Grace*

by Vanessa Smith

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Reviewed by Dave Williamson

Sometimes it is the quiet, unassuming person, the one never “admired for admiration’s sake,” who proves to be captivating. Sometimes a story about such a person can grab your attention and cause you to nod your approval: *Yes! This author gets it exactly right!*

Vanessa Smith, a Vancouverite now living in Montreal, succeeds in just that way with *Grace*, which happens to be Number 17 in the Novella Series published by Toronto’s Quattro Books.

Smith uses no flashy language, no precious metaphors, no grammatical quirks – only straight-ahead, uncluttered prose that is perfectly suited to the first-person narrative voice of Grace Linde, a bright twenty-two-year-old. The novella perfectly captures that time of youth between college and commitment.

Grace, taller than average, dissatisfied with her looks, living in the shadow of her achieving older sister Rachel, has just graduated with an arts degree, majoring in art history. Unsure about what she wants to do, work or continue her studies, she indulges in an odd hobby – buying other people’s discarded photos at the local flea market. And she tags along with her fashion-conscious friend Ilena, “a self-professed fashion addict who often foregoes purchasing groceries to feed her shopping addiction” (25), to a Vancouver bar.

“Ilena is my best friend,” Grace tells us. “We met at UBC in first-year Spanish class. Bonded instantly over our shared linguistic ineptitude and our mutual appreciation of our professor’s Barcelonian buttocks” (26).

They go to Celebrities “on Davie Street, right in the heart of the gay village” (26). This bar’s clientele consists of “seventy-five per cent gay guys and twenty-five percent straight girls. . . . The guys come for the music and the half-naked go-go dancers. The girls come for the half-priced Smirnoff Ice and freedom from the dance floor advances of drunken straight males” (27). Ilena’s brother Pavel moonlights here as a drag queen named Ophelia Cox.

Despite what Ilena regards as Grace’s drab appearance, Grace does attract the attention of a straight older man who just happens to be there and who makes himself known to her. The man, Jack Lewis, eventually invites her on a date – her very first date, though she’s participated in numerous adolescent hook-ups.

What might have descended into frothy chicklit develops into an exploration of human desire as well as a rite of passage for Grace, albeit a rather tragic one.

As she becomes sexually involved with Jack, he, an apparently successful businessman twice her age, turns into her mentor in lovemaking. “Desire is a complicated thing,” he tells her. “I think most women misunderstand it. We’re all pretty selfish beings. . . . Often, the image we’re attracted to isn’t the one we see, but the one we see in their eyes. There’s no such thing as unselfish desire” (79).

Grace keeps her liaisons with Jack more or less secret from her friends and her family, and she knows little about his somewhat mysterious business trips. While falling for him, she strives to be pragmatic about where they are headed. But not pragmatic enough.

Vanessa Smith's quietly impressive first work of fiction (which is graced with a quietly impressive and appropriate cover design) should be required reading for female college graduates and anyone interested in how to tell a first-rate contemporary story. ♣

Dave Williamson is a Winnipeg writer whose latest book is a comic novel called *Dating*.

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