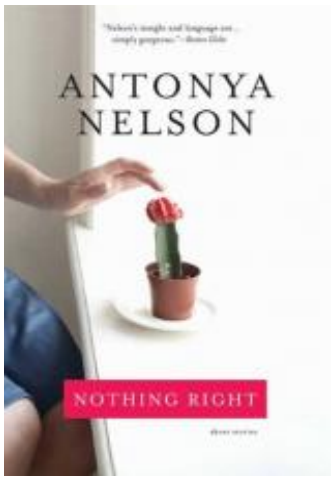
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Nothing Right: Short Stories

by Antonya Nelson



About the Book

In her latest stories, Antonya Nelson sets her characters in the middle of the country, at the edge of reason. In the title story, a depressed mother follows her delinquent son from juvenile court to the maternity ward, shocked when teenage fatherhood turns his life around. In ?Party of One,? a woman tries to protect her suicidal sister from a painful breakup, while hiding a dark secret of her own.

?Falsetto? also features a protective sister, who learns a lot from her adolescent brother in the wake of a tragic accident. In ?People People,? a married woman discovers her own insecurities while trying to shelter her obese, romantically destructive sister. In ?Biodegradable,? a traveling businesswoman finds a romantic connection unexpectedly close to home. ?Or Else? and ?OBO? both feature desperate characters trying to lie their way into tight-knit, nuclear families, with unexpected results. In ?Kansas? and ?We and They,? bohemian Wichita families cope with unexpected challenges: a kidnapping within the family in the first story, and an unexpected alliance with religious neighbors in the latter. ?DWI? and ?Shauntrelle? both take place in the aftermath of a romantic affair: In ?DWI,? a woman copes with her lover?s suicide, and ?Shauntrelle? features an unlikely female alliance in the wake of a failed marriage and love affair.

In **Nothing Right**, human relationships --- between lovers, spouses, siblings, and parents and children --- are laid bare, revealing the fundamental vulnerabilities we all share.

Discussion Guide

1. How does ?Nothing Right,? the title story and the first in the collection, set the scene for the rest of the book? What themes, relationships, and problems in ?Nothing Right? are echoed in later stories?

2. ?We and They? and ?Nothing Right? both revolve around an unexpected teenage pregnancy. How are the young couples? circumstances similar and different in each story? Which pregnancy seems to have a better result for the

families involved?

3. All of the stories in Nothing Right take place in the Midwest or Southwest. In which of the stories is the setting particularly important? Which stories especially conjure up a room, a house, a city, or a landscape?

4. In ?Party of One,? Nicholas Dempsey goes from thinking sisters Mona and Emily are strikingly similar, to thinking they?re nothing alike. What changes Nicholas?s mind? What similarities and differences between the sisters are invisible to Nicholas?

5. Discuss the effects of secrets and lies in the story ?OBO.? Who is the most duplicitous and who is the most truthful among the story?s four main characters, Abby, Lucia, Michael, and Christine? What secrets are hidden within the Bonatello family home in Wichita?

6. In ?Falsetto,? Michelle sees a reflection of herself, her brother Ellton, and her boyfriend Max, and ?Just that quick, she quit loving her boyfriend.? (88) What brings about Michelle?s sudden change of heart? How does her decision affect her relationship with her brother?

7. Pairs of adult sisters are prominent in the stories ?Party of One,? ?Kansas,? and ?People People.? Compare the relationships in each of these stories. How do these sisters by turns help and hurt each other? Which sisters seem to have the healthiest sibling bond? Which have the most destructive?

8. Much of the action in ?Kansas? takes place on the family?s cell phones. How does each family member use the family cell plan? What cracks and fissures in the family are revealed by this collective plan?

9. Discuss the influence of déjà vu in ?Biodegradable.? What encounters and relationships seem to repeat themselves over the course of the story?

10. In ?Shauntrelle,? Constance compares Fanny Mann?s first impressions to her own: Fanny Mann appears warm, while Constance appears cold. When do these impressions appear true? When do the two women seem to switch warm and cold roles?

11. In both ?Or Else? and ?OBO,? a character lies to gain entry into another family?s home. Compare and contrast David?s and Abby?s motivations for deceit. Which character?s reasons for lying seem more justifiable? Which liar appears more desperate by the end of the story?

12. ?Or Else? ends on a question, as Danielle and David stand outside the Hart house: ?Danielle asked [David], ?Do you wish you were in there, instead of out here?? (239) Does David?s negative response feel like another lie, the beginning of a truth, or a combination of the two? Why does the story end on this uncertain note?

13. Adultery takes place frequently in Nothing Right; many of the characters are beginning, ending, or negotiating an affair. Discuss how Nelson portrays adultery in each story. On the whole, does she seem to humanize or demonize these sexual impulses? Explain.

14. In many of these stories, dead lovers or relatives have a strong hold on living characters. Which characters seem

mostly motivated by grief? Which characters seem able to overcome their losses?

15. If you?ve read Nelson?s stories or novels before, how does Nothing Right compare to her previous work? If you?re new to Nelson?s short stories, which made the strongest impression?

16. According to the San Francisco Chronicle, ?Nelson, an astute observer of everyday conflicts, has skillfully mapped out life in this unforgettable collection, and sooner or later a reader will run into herself in a story, the character?s troubles as real as the reader?s own.? Did you find a version of yourself in any of Nelson?s characters? If so, which character spoke to you?

Author Bio

Antonya Nelson is the author of eight books of fiction, including **Female Trouble** and the novels **Talking in Bed**, **Nobody?s Girl**, and **Living to Tell**. Nelson?s work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Harper?s*, *Redbook*, and many other magazines, as well as in anthologies such as **Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards**and **The Best American Short Stories**. She has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, an NEA grant, and, recently, the Rea Award for Short Fiction. She is married to writer Robert Boswell and lives in New Mexico, Colorado, and Texas, where she holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston.

Critical Praise

"Nelson is at her best creating densely packed, almost novel-like family mini-sagas."

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