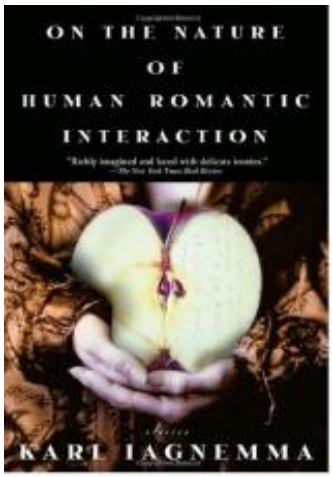
ReadingGroupGuides
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On the Nature of Human Romantic Interaction

by Karl Iagnemma



About the Book

Winner of the *Paris Review* Discovery Prize for best first fiction and anthologized in **The Best American Short Stories 2002**, Karl Iagnemma has been recognized as a writer of rare talent. His literary terrain is the world of science, with its charged boundary between the rational mind and the restless heart. In Iagnemma's stories, mathematicians and theoreticians, foresters and doctors, yearn to sustain bonds as steadfast as the equations and principles that anchor their lives. A frustrated academic tries to diagram his troubled relationship with his girlfriend but fails to create a formula for romance. A nineteenth-century phrenologist must reexamine the connection between knowledge and passion when a young con-woman beats him at his own game. A jaded professor dreams endlessly of his two obsessions: a beautiful former colleague and the theorem that made her famous. Inventive, wise, funny, and disquieting, Karl Iagnemma's first collection attests to his spirited imagination and his prodigious literary gifts.

Discussion Guide

1. The collection's title, drawn from a chapter in the first narrator's dissertation, conveys an aura of research findings and careful scrutiny of data. If this collection were indeed a scholarly exposition, what would the findings be? What consistencies and anomalies do these stories convey about the nature of human romantic interaction? Do the stories have a sum?

2. Discuss the ways in which intellect and emotion are portrayed in the book. Do you believe mind and heart to be consistently at odds with each other or inextricable?

3. One of the most inventive aspects of the collection is its diversity of characters, and the fact that all of them work in a rarefied field. What universal qualities do these disparate (and often desperate) men and women possess? Were there any characters whose experiences seemed far removed from your own at first but proved to mirror your personal history in some way?

4. The stories in this collection, each of them originally published in somewhat different form, caught the attention of editors at some of the most competitive literary journals in the country. How do you personally define exceptional writing? What literary techniques (such as the use of fresh metaphors or taut narrative tension) appear to be at work in this collection?

5. Discuss the collection's range of time periods and settings, from frontier America to ultracontemporary urban life. Have scientific enlightenment, increased civil liberties, and other hallmarks of the modern world improved the lives of lovers?

6. What does the title story indicate about the nature of attraction? If Alexandra's father composed a similar formula for winning your heart, what would the factors and variables be?

7. In what way does the history of Slaney provide a fitting backdrop for the title story?

8. In "The Phrenologist's Dream," what does Jeremiah need from Sarah? Discuss the hopes of Jeremiah's customers; is his spurious occupation a commentary on any particular human urge?

9. "Zilkowski's Theorem" melds the arenas of academia and love to create a rich portrait of humiliation and vengeance. By the end of the story, are Henderson and Czogloz even?

10. In "The Confessional Approach" and "Kingdom, Order, Species," the author writes from a first-person female point of view. Besides gender, what else do the narrators of these stories have in common?

11. Discuss the ethical dilemma encountered in "The Confessional Approach." How do you interpret the closing scene? In what way did Kennison impact Freddy's self-perception and the future of his relationship?

12. What does "The Indian Agent" indicate about the narrator's approach to Christianity and to honor? Does "The Indian Agent" contain any elements of a love story?

13. In "Kingdom, Order, Species," **Woody Plants** underscores Kaye's experience of the world. When John Poole inscribes her book with the phrase "lawless in the pursuit of knowledge," does this refute or confirm what she previously believed about the order of things?

14. The ore miner's wife misinterprets her husband's mathematical symbols as being demonic. Discuss the many historic tensions reflected by her fear, such as tensions between religious and scientific leaders or between philanthropists and the researchers they support.

15. In what way does "Children of Hunger" pay homage to those who play supporting roles, some of which prove to be physically and emotionally treacherous? Do you believe the story reflects the mind-set of most driven achievers?

Author Bio

Karl Iagnemma is a principal research scientist in the Mechanical Engineering department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He holds a B.S. from the University of Michigan, and an M.S. and Ph.D. from MIT, where he was a National Science Foundation Graduate Fellow. He has performed postdoctoral research at MIT, and has been a visiting researcher at the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory and the National Technical University of Athens (Greece). He currently serves on the editorial board of the IEEE Transactions on Robotics and the Journal of Field Robotics.

Dr. Iagnemma was chosen as one of 16 people who redefined science in 2003 by SEED magazine. He was a 2005 nominee for a MacArthur Foundation fellowship.

Critical Praise

"Iagnemma's desperate, comic, and determined heroes seek, with beautiful futility, formulas for love, loss, history, religion, and odd arts. Here are crackpots and lovelorn, bewildered geniuses, sincerely seeking impossible truths. These are wonderful stories, and Karl Iagnemma is one of our very best young writers."--- *Brad Watson, National Book Award finalist and author of* ***The Heaven of Mercury***"Karl Iagnemma's stories are carefully written and beautifully detailed in their investigations of people caught up in the webs of science and history, and they dramatize, with great precision, the traps that the mind and body can sometimes stumble into. He is affectionate and severe about his chosen territory, the Midwest: this is a fine book."--- *Charles Baxter, author of* ***The Feast of Love***

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