*One Person Away From You,* by Andrew Bertaina rev. by Olivia Reiman

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Andrew Bertaina is an author from California, which is prevalent in the settings of his book, *One Person Away From You.* He now lives in Washington DC, where he graduated from American University with an MFA in creative writing. He published *One Person Away From You* in 2021, which won the Moon City Press Fiction award in 2020. Bertaina’s work has also appeared in, *The Threepenny Review, Witness, Redivider, Orion, Moon City Review,* and *The Best American Poetry.* He is also a Lecturer at Howard University and is an adjunct faculty member at American University. In *One Person Away From You,* Andrew Bertaina created a series of short stories that seem realistic enough to be believable, but also abstract enough for the reader to question what’s going on. Using a compilation of poems, flash fiction, and comedic journalism entries, Bertaina manages to create a world that seems so familiar, each story representing what love means to them. But while accomplishing that, each story manages to have unique aspects to them, from a widow grieving the loss of her husband, to a woman turning into a swan. This makes reading the book exciting, as you can create connections with each story, while also having so much variety between them so you don’t get bored.

*One Person Away From You* at its core, could be described as one person away from you, it's about the successes and misfortunes with love, and all the connections the characters have with the people around them. These short stories make you feel like you’re peering into someone's life, a bystander watching romantic or tragic events unfold. Like a woman writing a list of sex tips, except they aren’t really sex tips. In “Courtesy of Cosmopolitan: 24 Big Bang Sex Tips” the narrator is poking fun at the stereotypes of sex, and what is expected of women when it comes to being intimate. Which is something many women go through, but it is written in a way that seems fun and laughable, making it easier to digest.

“Keep Things sexy by surprising him after a shower wearing all your clothes. Dig through the closet and into winter clothes, putting on sweatpants and shirts that say things like JV TRACK on them. After seeing you, he’ll be surprised and will probably want to talk about what kinds of times you recorded in the 400 meters.”

Similarly written, “A Woman’s Life: An Abridged Version '' approaches the topic of divorce and losing relationships with your kids. She narrates the story in chunks, each chunk detailing a different point in time. We move through time with her, experiencing her divorce and subsequently the loss of her child. Both of these are examples of what Bertaina is trying to accomplish, stories of familiarity, which link back to each other through a person. “A Woman’s Life: An Abridged Version '' connects to the theme of one person away from you, such as the narrator's ex-husband and daughter. “Courtesy of Cosmopolitan: 24 Big Bang Sex Tips” infers the person is the men she’s encountered. These two stories are similar in the way they are narrated, but they differ in the emotion and tone, which is enjoyable for the reader. In each of Bertaina’s short stories, there is some connection to another person, in which the narrator revolves their story around.

One short story that really captured the essence of being connected to another person is, “The Nature of Time.” This piece really captured the emotions of the struggles of a college drop out, not really knowing what you’re doing in life. It starts in Spain, a man and his friend traveling the world, figuring out their purpose and pursuing their dreams. They end up in Italy, standing near the train tracks, his friend smoking a cigarette:

“The sky was like a cathedral, a row of clouds was blowing towards the green-capped hills, and it smelled of wildflowers and honeysuckle.”

“And then, as if he’d been preparing himself for it for ages, he stubbed out the cigarette, spun around and jumped across the tracks in front of the speeding train. His body was flung like a rag doll down onto the tracks, where he was slowly dragged before I could look away and only hear the awful sound of the train’s blaring horn.”

The imagery of this scene is very beautiful. The descriptions of the clouds, and how that painted the scene for his friend jumping in front of the train. While this is very disturbing, the writing really sucks you in, and makes you want to know more, fully understand what is going on. At the end, the narrator talks about how often he thinks about what happened to his friend, “For this dream and memory return to me again and again, such that I see myself trapped forever in the thick web of time, unable to escape that afternoon in Italy…” Bertaina does a good job at creating a centralized theme throughout his stories, and while they aren’t actually connected to each other, you are able to find that theme in all of them.

“Something Miraculous” is another good example of fully realizing that you have people around you. “Something Miraculous” is about a woman and her friend, the narrator is very optimistic and waiting for a miracle to happen to her. The dialogue in this story is very interesting, and fast paced. As is the inner dialogue of the narrator.

“I put my hand on Sally’s forearm. “Don’t you remember the moon, Sally? The monstrous fucking moon, how we were sure it wanted to swallow us?” Sally looked over at me; thick lines ran across her cheeks, her forehead.

“Look at the cars ahead of us Sally; they’re split like the Red Sea.”

I ran a finger across the back of her hand, tracing the spidery thin veins.

“It’s a miracle. You can stop now. You can stop now.””

While only the narrator is talking in this passage, the dialogue is still very captivating, and puts the reader on the edge of their seat, wanting to know what’s going to happen to Sally. The imagery of this book is also very impressive and adds depth to certain scenes. A paragraph from the story “Something Miraculous” really captures the detailed imagery Bertaina writes about:

“Out over the sea, the clouds were dark; it looked like rain, like thunder, like all hell would be loosed on Earth…. If the world was going to stay the same cracked and broken place, if the bones of the dinosaurs were real, and all the dead were not going to rise from their graves to sing Hallelujah in unison, then something else was going to have to change.”

This passage really captures the reader's attention and adds to the scene. The description of the clouds, and thunder sets the tone for the conclusion of the story. This story focuses on the struggle of adulthood and figuring yourself out while not really knowing what you’re doing. The scenery adds to that unknown feeling, being scared and uncertain.

*One Person Away From You* offers a wide variety of stories that will make the reader laugh, and worry about the characters choices. It gives insight into some struggles of adulthood, and what it’s like to question your beliefs and morals. Additionally, the story *Forty Days* is similar to the book *A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Backman, so if you like the short story *Forty Days,* then you’ll like *A Man Called Ove.* Overall, this is a series of very compelling stories that readers will find very intriguing.