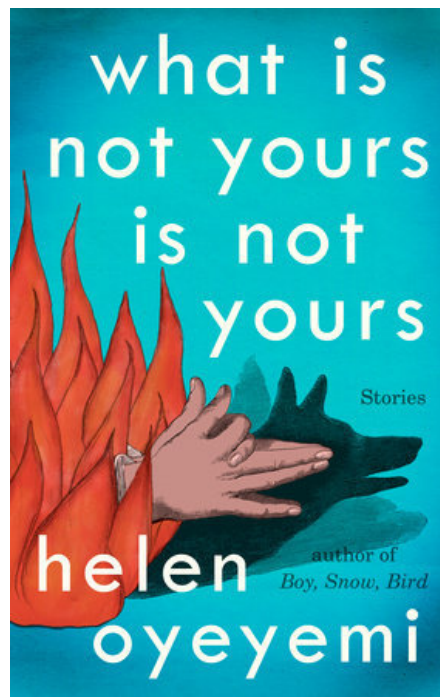




What is Not Yours is Not Yours

Helen Oyeyemi

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The key to a house, the key to a heart, the key to a secret—Oyeyemi’s keys not only unlock elements of her characters’ lives, they promise further labyrinths on the other side. In “Books and Roses” one special key opens a library, a garden, and clues to at least two lovers’ fates. In “Is Your Blood as Red as This?” an unlikely key opens the heart of a student at a puppeteering school. “‘Sorry’ Doesn’t Sweeten Her Tea” involves a “house of locks,” where doors can be closed only with a key—with surprising, unobservable developments. And in “If a Book Is Locked There’s Probably a Good Reason for That Don’t You Think,” a key keeps a mystical diary locked (for good reason).

Oyeyemi’s tales span multiple times and landscapes as they tease boundaries between coexisting realities. Is a key a gate, a gift, or an invitation?

What is Not Yours is Not Yours Details

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Author : Helen Oyeyemi

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From Reader Review What is Not Yours is Not Yours for online ebook

Jill says

Helen Oyeyemi may be one of the most imaginative writers working today so it is no surprise that her story collection astounds and amazes. Using the metaphorical (and often literal) conceit of keys, the stories tackle themes of discovery, connections, and belonging.

The first story – my personal favorite – is entitled Books and Roses and reveals Ms. Oyeyemi at her finest. It begins (as do many in this collection) as a fable: “Once upon a time in Catalonia a baby was found in a chapel.” As the story progresses, two women – both abandoned – share interwoven stories and a special key (and a book of roses) becomes integral to their fates. The story is masterfully conceived.

Other favorites are “Is Your Blood as Red as This?”, which centers on puppeteers and blurs the lines between the real and the surreal as characters grasp with sexual identity and confusion and the restoration of order. (“The wooden devil suspected keys cause more problems than they solve, so she followed Myrna with one plan in mind, to do her bit to restore order.’). In “Sorry Doesn’t Sweeten Her Tea”, two young teens are confronted with disillusionment when their musical idol abuses a down-and-out prostitute and take a fabalistic revenge.

And, in Presence, the student puppeteer’s compatriots, Radha (a bereavement counselor) and Myrna, are now married and conduct an unusual experiment: isolation in their apartment, which always registers the time as twelve thirty, to reach acceptance loss and the son they never had.

Stories like these are merged with modern-day fairy tales – Drownings, a fire-and-water fable complete with an evil tyrant, and Dornicka and the St. Martin’s Day Goose, which are a bit less compelling. The majority of the characters are female on the brink of sexual or life awakening, and they are joined by the nether world of ghosts, puppets, and magical beings. I delighted in Ms. Oyeyemi’s previous books – Mr. Fox and Boy Snow Bird, and it her creative vision continues to remain strong.

Cheri says

3.5 Stars

Weird, sometimes wonderful, but... just as often crazy-weird, as in if she was sitting across from me telling me these stories, I would either suspect she had taken some magical mystery tour courtesy of Timothy Lear’s medicine cabinet, or she needed drugs of another kind.

“books and roses” – This was my favorite, and the reason I kept reading the remainder of the stories. What’s not to like about a story including a mysterious library and a locked garden?

“A library at night is full of sounds: The unread books can’t stand it any longer and announce their contents, some boasting, some shy, some devious.”

“sorry doesn’t sweeten her tea” – rock stars and their bad behaviors

"It's a nice house for Ched too, in that it's big and he got it on the cheap, and anyway he's not really comfortable in overly normal situations. As it is he hears voices. Nobody else hears these voices but they're not just in Ched's head, you know? In this world there are voices without form; they sing and sing, as they have from the beginning and will continue until the end. Ched borrows their melodies: That's the music part of the songs he writes.

"is your blood as red as this?" – creative tale about puppets and puppetry.

"You told me about how stories come to our aid in times of need. You'd recently been on a flight from Prague, you told me, and the plane had gone through a terrifyingly long tunnel of turbulence up there in the clouds. 'Everyone on the plane was freaking out, except the girl beside me,' you said. 'She was just reading her book--maybe a little faster than usual, but otherwise untroubled. I said to her: 'Have you noticed that we might be about to crash?' And she said 'Yes, I did notice that actually, which makes it even more important for me to know how this ends.'"

"I was on my way out and they thought they were helping me; instead they turned motion and intelligible speech into a currency with which personhood is earned."

"drownings" – a "warning" tale, not wonderful but okay.

"There's that difficulty with delirium too: You see it raging in another person's eyes and then it flickers out. That's the most dangerous moment, it's impossible to see something that's so swiftly and suddenly swallowed you whole."

"presence" – bizarre ... like an episode of Twilight Zone based on something like Dr. Phil's couple's counseling...

"Two minutes until midnight. She looked around at the pale blue walls, then out of the window and into the communal garden; there was a night breeze, and the flowers were wide-awake."

"a brief history of the homely wench society" – This was okay, more relatable but to me didn't feel as if it fit in with the others.

"dornicka and the st. martin's day goose"- just okay

"freddy barrandov checks...in?" I enjoyed almost everything about this story.

"Yours is a pitiful existence. I had you followed for six months and all you did apart from turn up to play in a sandpit with infants was go to galleries, bars, the cinema, and a couple of friends' houses. What kind of person are you? I spoke to your weed dealer and he said you don't buy that much. You are without virtue and without serious vice. Do you really think you can go on like this?"

"if a book is locked there's probably a good reason why, don't you think?" - My second favorite in this collection, with a weirdly wonderful ending.

Doug Bradshaw says

This is a collection of short stories, each with interesting and somewhat magical settings that are refreshing and fun to read. However, I found myself a little lost in some of the stories wondering how I missed a turn here and a clue there, and my biggest problem with the tales is that they didn't end with quite the umph I imagined or wanted.

A few concepts that describe some of the action: puppets that come alive, orphans left with benefits, evil rulers, female lovers, magical lands, dreams that turn to reality, manipulative musicians, secret protectors and wealthy men with girlfriends.

The writing is fun but it's also a little too ethereal for me.

I love it that the author is so young and talented and that she has created her own little unique niche. I believe these tales may be better for females, but they're worth a quick read if you're in the mood for fairy tales.

Kelly says

I love, love, loved Mr. Fox. I did not love this one quite as much, but I did like it quite a bit. It's about the ghosts of connection and missed opportunities and prejudice and metaphors that are more real than reality. It's about people who love shadows, people who are trying to understand and getting in their own way, people who can't quite trust and are eaten up inside. It's got modern issues without ever being about "modern life" in an annoying way, it stays mythic and has a wide ranging lens, taking in many different worlds without ever quite entirely leaving this one. I loved the first story (Books and Roses) the most (oh god so much!) , but "Homely Wench Society", "Drownings" and "Presence" wound up being the most memorable after that one. I didn't quite get her insistence on those puppeteers (one of the weaker stories, I thought, at least the thread she was interested in). But I suspect that part of it is just that I would just rather have seen more of Montserrat and Lucy and "Books and Roses" because that was the closest to my escape/reality.

I look forward to reading more Oyeyemi, though. I love her sensibility, her aesthetic, her tale-as-spell weaving. White is for Witching next, I think.

(Longer review written at a greater distance included in my fall/winter roundup on my blog:
<https://shouldacouldawouldabooks.com/...>)

Taryn Pierson says

Reading Helen Oyeyemi is like working out with a friendly but very aggressive personal trainer. At some point, you're going to find yourself splayed out on the mat, panting like an animal and protesting that it's too hard, you can't do one more set. And then she'll blow her whistle in your face and cheerfully scream at you to get a move on.

In much the same way as a good, hard workout eventually leads to an endorphin-fueled breakthrough, Oyeyemi's short stories eventually clarified for me, and what began as a veins-bulging effort relaxed into a steady rhythm that I could keep pace with. Oyeyemi will never let you get comfortable, but if you strap on your weight belt and bring the intensity, her brand of magical realism will slowly coalesce into something you can hold, loosely, if not fully grasp.

I'm not a big re-reader, but this collection seems ripe for revisiting. In fact, when I finished the first story,

“Books and Roses,” I flipped right back to the beginning and started again, convinced I’d missed something. I still don’t know if I did or not, even after reading it through twice. Oyeyemi is slippery that way. I wish I had encountered books like this in my college English curriculum—I think it would have totally floored me to read about the world as it actually is, as opposed to how it was, for privileged white men, hundreds of years ago. And yes, I realize the strangeness of referring to Oyeyemi as a realist when her work is so clearly fantastical, but her characters—these are people I recognize, that are real, that could exist somewhere and have something important to say, even though history up to this point has told them in no uncertain terms that they are insignificant due to their gender or skin tone or sexuality, and therefore not worthy of a voice.

With regards to Riverhead and Goodreads for the beautiful (deckle-edged! What?!) advance copy, which I was lucky enough to win in a recent giveaway. On sale tomorrow, March 8!

More book recommendations by me at www.readingwithhippos.com

Nat says

The short stories in this collection are inherently weird, but Oyeyemi makes it work with her transformative, deeply moving, and well-crafted style. These are stories about a variety of characters—from different backgrounds, religions, ethnicities, sexualities—and I loved how certain characters were woven into each other's lives. Recognizing a character in a newly told tale and feeling connected to them for having known other parts of them in a previous story was the best feeling. And also important side note: The stories in **What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours** are linked thematically by keys of all kinds that added an extra layer of mystery.

But looking back over the course of Oyeyemi's nine tales, I seemed to have taken favor for three pieces that I'd like to share next:

books and roses:

This piece was the opening story, and it completely knocked my socks off. Especially towards the end when we got to know a tragically beautiful story about two lovers' fates. It made me question everything.

Plus, there was a beautiful passage about reading that won my heart over:

“I went into the library at night and found peace and fortitude there. I didn’t know where to begin, so I just looked for a name that I knew until I came to a life of Joan of Arc, which I sat down and read really desperately. I read without stopping until the end, as if somebody were chasing me through the pages with a butcher’s knife. The next night I read more slowly, a life of Galileo Galilei that took me four nights to finish because his fate was hard to take. I kept saying, “Those bastards,” and once after saying that I heard a sound in another part of the library. A library at night is full of sounds: The unread books can’t stand it any longer and announce their contents, some boasting, some shy, some devious. But the sound I heard wasn’t the sound of a book.”

It really stuck with me throughout my reading.

“sorry” doesn’t sweeten her tea:

I read this at just the right time in my life. **“sorry” doesn’t sweeten her tea** is a crucial piece on fame, abuse, and victim-blaming. It's told through the eyes of the narrator, who's boyfriend's daughter is a

disillusioned fan seeking an apology from a pop star.

This short story lays down how messed up an abusive situation can get, especially in front of the public-eye. When a woman uploads a Youtube video, where she speaks of how famous pop star Matyas Füst assaulted her, all she wants is to get an apology. A sincere one. But instead she receives this:

“Ah yes, the comments.

Noor couldn’t make himself look, so Aisha and I read some of them aloud. There was a lot of LOL cool allegations junkie, maybe it was all a dream? and LMAO people will say anything to ruin a good man’s reputation stay strong Matyas!

If only that was the worst of it. Aisha’s haggard face as she read: Oh boohoo. What’s this one complaining about? He paid her, didn’t he? She hit him, didn’t she? Admitted all this herself. Does she think you can hit someone and just walk away? I read: She should count herself lucky: men probably treat broken down old whores worse than that in her country. And she got to bang Matyas! Matyas Füst can beat me up any time baby LOL

Then the apologists came out to play: Even if this is true is it the full story? We know that Matyas wouldn’t just lash out like that so we need to be asking what she did . . .”

The comments that followed in where just horrible to read in the sense that it was real. Too real. This isn't some fictitious situation...these things have happened and keep happening over and over because victim-blaming is very much real and alive. And it was a real wake-up call to see it written so honestly in here.

I seriously have only love and respect for Oyeyemi for tackling such an important subject that made me re-evaluate everything.

a brief history of the homely wench society:

I hadn't noticed it until I had moved on to the next story, but this piece features the same character that was mentioned in **“sorry” doesn’t sweeten her tea**, and I loved her (Dayang Sharif, the sister of the disillusioned fan) even more in here.

It's set while Day's in college and among a lot of happenings, she meets Hercules Demetriou, who made me swoon a damn lot. I was fully rooting for their budding romance, even if all they did was try to not look at each other and almost never talk (aka my kind of romance).

“Day found Hercules Demetriou sitting at her usual desk in the library. Rather than talk to him she went to his usual desk, which was unoccupied, and set up her laptop there. He looked over at her three times; she looked over at him once. Just once, and he came over. Argh, was it that pitifully obvious?”

The author perfectly describes that moment of catching unwanted feelings.

And, oh, this next part where he invites her to an infamous dinner made my heart content on a whole new level:

“I can see you believe you lot are new and improved, but to have this dinner where each of you brings one person to show off to the others . . .”

“Isn’t that what all socializing’s like when you’re in a relationship?” Hercules asked, resting his chin on her palm. This boy.

“Yes, well, I don’t know about that—”

“Never had a boyfriend? Girlfriend?”

She took her hand back, stood on tiptoe, and whispered into his ear: “Ask someone else.”

“You’ll be jealous,” Hercules whispered back.

Day waved him away and climbed the last few steps to her door. "I won't. Goodnight, Herc."
He cupped his hands around his mouth and walked backward down the stairs, calling out: "You like me. She likes me. She doesn't know why and she can't believe it, but Dayang Sharif likes me!"

I'm grinning ear to ear right now. This boy.

Also, apropos of nothing, this next piece is extremely noteworthy!!

"Ed was working on a piece about hierarchies of knowledge for female love interests in the early issues of her favorite comic books; how very odd it must be to operate within a story where you're capable, courageous, droll, at the top of your field professionally and yet somehow still not permitted the brains to perceive that the man you see or work with every day is exactly the same person as the superhero who saves your life at night. "Seems like someone behind the scenes clinging to the idea that the woman whose attention you can't get just can't see 'the real you,' no?"

Oyeyemi is telling it exactly like it is.

Overall, I was incredibly pleased with the storytelling in **What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours**. I love magical realism quite a lot, and Helen Oyeyemi made it work just right in this collection.

Note: I'm an Amazon Affiliate. If you're interested in buying **What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours, just click on the image below to go through my link. I'll make a small commission!**

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Ioana says

bigarurre: "a medley of sundry colors running together" and/or "a discourse running oddly and fantastically, from one matter to another"

I was mesmerized by Oyeyemi's dizzying imagination from the start. Her stories flow seamlessly and morph into unexpected shapes within the turn of a sentence. You come to think you're reading about an abandoned baby left at a monastery, but by then you're following the life of a laundress, getting lost in a library where books whisper and rustle in the night, and of course, there is also the beautiful garden covered in wild roses and the mountain that protects those who believe.

But it's not just the stories-as-such that dance in these unpredictable kaleidoscopic forms. Oyeyemi's descriptions - of phenomena, people, relations - also defy conventions and rules. In introducing a character, Oyeyemi for example does not describe their appearance, needs, aspirations, or other standard fare, but rather reveals them more subtly, by telling us that this person "wore a chain around her neck, [and] told people that she was fifty years old and gave them looks that dared them to say she was in good condition for her age" (she was 35).

Oyeyemi is, in other words, a poet. Her book has been described by more illustrious reviewers as "fever-dream" in quality (NY times book review cover blurb) - but really, this is no Timothy Leary; what this is, is vivid, completely lucid/sober and magnificently penetrating poetry. And, thankfully, through a character's research into the term *bigarurre*, Oyeyemi offers us a vital clue to unpacking her style, because the orchestra

of images she conducts is precisely both "a medley of sundry colors running together" and/or "a discourse running oddly and fantastically, from one matter to another."

Did I enjoy this book? Well, while I loved being swept off my feet and carried along on a surreal journey into creative genius, I can't say I enjoyed being pulled under by the currents. At times, I was drowning - I had absolutely no way to grasp either what was happening or the meaning behind a gesture, a character, the entire story. And I know that's the beauty of such genius - it leads you to ask your own questions. But still, at times I felt so unmoored I lost interest, and was not very compelled to continue- you could say I was bored. But, as any teacher knows, boredom is most often a symptom of incomprehension, for which scaffolding is critical! Which means, I suppose, that I need to start reading poetry (I should! I've been wanting to! I know it's so critical..). And perhaps some books *on* poetry. At some point after that, I will make plans to revisit this book.

That said, I can absolutely see why this book is one which is raved about by the critics but maybe not as highly regarded by the rest of the public. I personally did not *enjoy* it, because put simply, this is top-tier mind-blowing poetry, and, as a novice poetry-reader, I didn't "get" much of it (my ultimate goal in life is to shed my scientific training and critical mindset and be able to fully appreciate art and poetry in their sensuous, embodied splendor. I am not even close to that now btw).

Still, my rating, based on my appreciation of Oyeyemi as an artist, cannot be less than a 5. I highly recommend this if you like thoughtful books, and especially if you appreciate poetry!

Anmiryam says

Some writers sideswipe you below the knees and knock you over. There you lie, breathless, with the world looking strange and incomprehensible, until you realize it's pretty amazing seeing ordinary things become extraordinary. That's as close as I can come to describing the experience of reading Helen Oyeyemi. I love her reliance on stories within stories which take her work to unexpected and untamed places. She seduces you so that when you finish reading you surface someplace unexpected that you don't necessarily understand, but find magical. This is literary writing at its most wild. Her style isn't for everyone, but if you relish the feeling of being pulled out of yourself, what are you waiting for? This new story collection isn't out until March, but there are five novels just waiting for you to read in the meantime.

As with *Boy, Snow, Bird* I am going to need to re-read this collection to fully unpack the meaning of keys and puppets along with the appropriation of fairy tale elements that underpin these stories about finding your own identity (sexual, gender, race). For what its worth, I love the indirection of the book's title. If what is not yours is not yours, it seems evident that what is yours is yours. The difficulty is understanding where the boundaries between the two lie and, for the characters here, the first question is so often: who am I?

For the record, my favorite story here is "books and roses." Set in the world's most phantasmagorical city, Barcelona, with much of the action occurring in Gaudi's La Pedrera -- the most amazing apartment building ever -- it is the perfect pairing of setting and style. Add to the wondrous *mise-en-scene* a plot that involves a mysterious library, a locked garden and pairs of unlikely lovers. Wonderful.

I also especially relished "a brief history of the homely wench society" -- even better than the title is the story's relative realism and gentle humor that help to bring you down from the dizzying disorientation you will be feeling by the time you reach it about 2/3 of the way through the collection. Read it if only to expand your future reading list!

Arielle Walker says

This gorgeously undulating collection of stories sits somewhere on the edges of this world, where magic exists unquestioned and unexplained, lurking horrors softened by the veil between reality and fantasy and always overcome - just like the old fairytales. These could even be *new* fairytales, for all that they disregard the tropes of Masculine and Feminine segregated into clearly defined roles. There is even a retelling, of sorts, of Little Red Riding Hood - though the wolf is not a wolf and Red is not a young girl.

But these aren't fairytales or fables or short stories *only* - they slip and twist about, defying categorisation. A pleasant little story about a highschool crush turns into a whimsical tale of puppetry, though sinister suggestions of control and power are always beneath the surface. Beneath other surfaces: lovers in a drowned city smile up at the survivors on land; a beloved artist hides a temperament that will change the lives of his lovers; an aloof woman holds another world in the pages of a book. Each story is very different, though a few characters make appearances here and there. Each story is utterly captivating.

Keys are, ostensibly, the link between each story - but I found books to be just as much of a recurring theme and the stories are even lovelier for it. Oyeyemi has somehow managed to capture the distinction between darkness that consumes and darkness that heals, and I can't wait to read more of her work!

Eilonwy says

I mostly enjoyed this collection of stories, all of which feature locks and keys (although I'm not sure I actually noticed that myself ...), and all of which contain some speculative or magical realism element. Many of the stories have the same characters popping up on the edges, so they're all in the same universe. I did enjoy seeing how characters from one story were viewed by the main character of another story.

However, while I found these all gripping and incredibly well-written, at the same time, I'm not sure I "got" quite a number of them. So I'm left feeling a little dense and wondering if I'm missing some brilliant insights and connections.

In a weird way, a number of these stories, especially "Is Your Blood as Red As This?", seemed as if they could have been the written versions of the comics in SuperMutant Magic Academy. Now I would love to see a collaboration between Jillian Tamaki and Helen Oyeyemi.

These stories have all fed my imagination whether I grasp them to their full depth or not!

karen says

congratulations! semifinalist in goodreads' best fiction category 2016!

books and roses

"sorry" doesn't sweeten her tea

is your blood as red as this?

drownings

presence

a brief history of the homely wench society

dorni?ka and the st. martin's day goose

freddy barrandov checks ... in?

if a book is locked there's probably a good reason for that don't you think

Puck says

Oh wow, how I love Helen Oyeyemi's writing. Her novels are like labyrinths: disorienting and a little scary, but they leave you with such a charming impression that you'll always remember them once you're finished. The same goes for these short stories, and although I didn't love all of them, I did find them hard to forget.

In ***What is Not Yours is Not Yours*** you'll find a collection of stories wherein a variety of characters – from different ethnicities, sexualities, religions – are all searching for something that is hard to find. The way to their lover's heart, the truth about their past, or a child that they never got. Keys are a reappearing item through all these stories, but sometimes they unlock things that should have stayed hidden...sometimes it's better that something is not yours.

"Every time I go into that bloody house there's a risk of coming out crazy. Because of the doors. They don't stay closed unless they're locked. Once you've done that you hear sounds behind them; sounds that convince you you've locked someone in."

Just like in her earlier books you'll find elements of Oyeyemi's creepy magical-realism in here, but actually these stories aren't meant to frighten you. They want to tell you something – however, I found it hard to figure out what. Most of these stories went right over my head: what happened? What is the message? Finishing **freddy barrandov checks...in?** and **books and roses** I was left confused, and not in a good way. Same with **is your blood as red as this?** Part **(no)** and **(yes)**: I liked the terrifying retelling/spin-off of Pinocchio, but what did just happen?!?

But on the good side, there also were a couple of stories that I did understand, and that I found beautiful and very thought-provoking. In the critical story **"sorry" doesn't sweeten her tea** a fan of an abusive pop-star makes him pay for his behavior, and in **a brief history of the homely wench society** a group of girls get their revenge on a misogynistic male fraternity in a hilarious way.

Presence on the other hand is a touching, sad story about an interracial couple who get to mourn the child that they never had, and remember their own lost childhood in the process.

So while I loved reading more of Oyeyemi's imaginative prose, I didn't enjoy the confusion that a lot of the stories left me with. Still, regardless of their meaning, these stories are so intriguing and the magical-realism

in them is so charming yet haunting, that they are certainly worth reading. So if you like a literary-challenge, read Oyeyemi. And as a parting gift, I leave you with this beautiful passage.

*“Montserrat wandered among the shelves of the library until it was too dark to see. There were more books here than could possibly be read in one lifetime, and they reminded Montse of how very much there was to wonder about in this world: **there were things she’d seen in dreams that she wanted to see again, and one of these books, any of them, might lead her back to those visions, and then further on, so that she saw marvels while still awake.**”*

Velma says

One astonishing, gulp-it-down, re-read it for deeper truths story ('books and roses', the opener) then just a long, slow ride of WTF? and thoughts of "what am I missing?" told in beautiful but impenetrable prose. Phrases caught me repeatedly (although none that feel shareable out of context), but overall I just didn't have the key to this house. (You'll get the reference if you've read it.)

I received an advanced reader's copy of this title from the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

Tiffany Reisz says

These were some weird ass stories. I like weird.

Helene Jeppesen says

This was my first read by Helen Oyeyemi, and it was definitely an interesting one. However, I must admit that her way of telling a story doesn't appeal strongly to me. Her stories are all entwined in some way, so that characters from one story suddenly appear in another, and that part was fine with me. It was the fact that her stories are quite messy and confusing that I didn't really like. I'm okay with open endings - I actually prefer them to closed endings - but I don't like it when the storyline and the ending are so vague that it's hard to figure out what is really going on.

That being said, I did find some of the short stories very intriguing, and I do like how Helen Oyeyemi mixes magical realism with everyday people and storylines. I also know of a lot of people who would love this story because of its magical realism, so definitely check it out if you have any interest in it.

Lotte says

Three stars isn't a bad rating and this isn't a bad short story collection, but I have to say, I'm disappointed. I knew that I liked Helen Oyeyemi's writing going into this (and I still do!), plus, the blurb sounded super intriguing and all the right people (aka people whose opinions I trust) liked it – all of this combined and I had very high expectations going into this collection. And while there were some pretty great stories, quite a few

of them left me more confused than anything else. I don't need to have everything spelled out for me, but a little more guidance would've been nice. More often than not, I felt rather lost in stories that combined multiple storylines into one and jumped from character to character – all things that aren't inherently bad, but were executed in a way that made me feel distant from the cast of characters and the narratives. I do think that Oyeyemi has a knack for the whimsical and magical that shines through in these stories. I also really liked that some characters reappeared in more than one story. Overall however, this was a bit of a let-down for me personally.

Nenia ? Queen of Literary Trash, Protector of Out-of-Print Gems, Khaleesi of Bodice Rippers, Mother of Smut, the Unrepentant, Breaker of Convention ? Campbell says

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There are two kinds of literature in the world: the kinds that make sense & the kinds that don't. In recent years, the kind of literature that *don't* make sense have become popular, lining the shelves in hipster bookstores, as devoted hipster-lit aficionados have long arguments about "what the author really meant." (And don't tell me that Helen Oyeyemi isn't hipster-lit, because I was in a hipster bookstore recently, & she had an entire display all to herself.)

This is the second of Helen Oyeyemi's works that I read. The first was her novella, MR. FOX. I thought the prose was gorgeous but I couldn't for the life of me figure out what was going on in the story. Everything was so confusing! Maybe this makes me a literary pleb, but I do like my stories to be at least somewhat straightforward. Leaving things up to interpretation is all well and good, but there comes a point where you can be so *vague* that your reader is pretty much left behind in the dust - and that's what happened to me.

Helen Oyeyemi and I were forced together yet again when WHAT IS NOT YOURS IS NOT YOURS was chosen as our next book in my book club - yes, this is the same book club that forced me to read WHERE'D YOU GO BERNADETTE. That was a positive experiment, however, so I figured I'd read WHAT IS NOT YOURS with an open mind. After all, she was a semi-finalist in the Goodreads Choice Awards for best fiction - the public majority can't be wrong, can they? ...Can they?

Well.

WHAT IS NOT YOURS IS NOT YOURS suffers the problem that plagues virtually every short story collection that I have encountered: uneven quality. Some stories are definitely heaps better than others, and the bad ones make the whole suffer. Interestingly, she also does what Roxane Gay did in her collection, which made me like both collections less: randomly insert magic-realism into the storyline for funsies (or for hipster-lit cred, one of those two) even if it doesn't make sense to do so.

Books and Roses: ??

A prime example of that old adage, "too much magic-realism spoils the broth." At its heart, Books and Roses contains two parallel love stories...but it isn't quite clear how they're tied (I know the main character & her key necklace are a part of it but I wasn't sure how). Maybe it's a blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment, which sucks, because I usually do my reading at the end of the evening, when my eyes are tired and I'm not at my intellectual best.

I will say that I loved the prose in this one, and it includes an LGBT love story (always good), but the overall story was like a pretty present left unwrapped. Yes, the wrapping paper and bow are lovely, but you didn't tie them together, you silly person, so it just feels unfinished and half-arsed.

"Sorry" Doesn't Sweeten Her Tea: ?????

Really more of a 4.5 rating, but I'm rounding up. YES. YES. This story was really, really good. Set in Iran, it's narrated by a man named Anton who works at a weight-loss clinic in Iran that uses valerian to knock people into a food-less coma for 3 days. He's in a relationship with a man named Noor who has two preteen daughters. Both the daughters are obsessed with this pop star, and are subsequently crushed when it's revealed that said pop star might actually be abusive when an interview goes viral about the prostitute he physically and mentally abused. Rather than being sympathetic or horrified, society turns around and blames the victim, which infuriates the girls, one of them especially, who becomes obsessed with the whole cases and seems determined to "punish" the pop star...by any means necessary.

This story is so creepy, and so good. I also feel like it's extremely relevant, because society does tend to blame the victim, and it *is* horrific, so that young girl's bewilderment at the internet comments on the viral video really hit me hard, because I feel the same way. How did we, as a society, as a whole, become so numb to the problems in our own society - especially in matters of social justice?

The only reason this doesn't get five stars is because of a random, half-arsed magic-realism subplot that was thrown in at the end. It felt like a very lazy way of ending the story, using magic to solve your problems. I was hoping for a more realistic resolution. Guess we can't have it all, though.

Is Your Blood as Red as This?: ??

Creepy story involving puppets and - you guessed it - magic-realism. The concept, built around a puppet

school and kids learning theater, was interesting, but the plot was so convoluted, I had a hard time following what was going on. To make it worse, the POV switches several times, too. Ugh.

Pros: more LGBT characters and a character from "Sorry" Doesn't, etc. makes a cameo in here. At first I thought this was coincidence, but no: characters from each of the short stories wander around into the other stories, which gives the overall book a more unifying feel. I thought this was very clever - Stephen King does this, too - and it made me wonder how many people didn't notice!

Drownings: ?

DROWNINGS is a straight-up fantasy tale. It's the only story like this in a collection and sticks out like a sore thumb. It also has an Angela Carter/Tanith Lee feel to it, but not in a good way - as much as I adore the work of those ladies, sometimes they get too weird. This story gets too weird.

Presence: ???

More character cameos!

Presence is a weird story about this woman's relationships, and could have just as easily come from Roxane Gay's DIFFICULT WOMEN. I wanted to like this story, because I'm a sucker for character studies, especially when portrayed through the intimate portrait of one's relationships at home, but I couldn't completely get into Presence. I think it was about time travel, but I'm not 100% sure.

A Brief History of the Homely Wench Society: ?????

WINNER WINNER CHICKEN DINNER! SOLID 5 STARS!

That's right. This is the best story in the collection. It was *amazing* - cute, hopeful, beautiful, and just all around good. It's set in a prestigious college, where there is a "secret society" of all dudes called the Bettincourts. They were kind of sexist, so a group of women created the Homely Wench Society to prank them and ended up just sticking with it after the prank ended.

One of the daughters from the "Sorry" story is the main character in Brief History, and ends up becoming a member of the Homely Wench Society. She and her group come up with another prank to play on the all-boys' club, but it's actually...harmless and kind of sweet. The ending is super adorable. A Brief History would have been excellent as a full-length novel, and it made me think that maybe Oyeyemi should be writing awesome YA-lit with kick-ass female protagonists. Heck, I'd read 'em!

Dornicka and the St. Martin's Day Goose: ????

I lied, Drownings isn't the only fantasy story. Dornicka is definitely a fairy tale - but it's not quite as fantastical or weird as Drownings; it's set in our world, instead. I actually really liked Dornicka. Little Red Riding Hood is such a creepy story, and Oyeyemi ends up putting her own interesting spin on it, while also keeping true to the illogic of the brothers Grimm fairytales. Yes, this one is good.

Freddy Barandov Checks...In?: ?

Nenia Campbell doesn't Get...It? Sorry, this story made zero sense and it was boring.

If a Book Is Locked There's Probably a Good Reason for That Don't You Think: ????

I was afraid the collection was going to fizzle out, but it ends on a decent note with If a Book Is Locked. This story takes place in an office setting. The narrator, an LGBT character (yaass!), is as preoccupied as everyone else with the new hire, the glamorous and enigmatic Eva. She's also the only one who doesn't turn on her when it's revealed that Eva is the mistress to a married man.

This story also has unnecessary magic-realism in it, but I don't know, for some reason I liked it here. Diaries are magical. I'm a writer, and a reader, so I know how words can seem to transport you somewhere else. Magic-realism really works for meta-books about books, because the line between fiction and reality is pretty much just in the readers' minds. It felt apropos, rather than twee, here.

Also, I loved the last line in this story. Very well done.

So there you have it, my review for WHAT IS NOT YOURS IS NOT YOURS. I was honestly afraid that I wasn't going to like any stories in this collection at all, but ended up enjoying the stories a lot more than I

thought I would - and even loving some of them, which was especially amazing!

One thing I especially liked was that each character has a different ethnic background and almost all of them are LGBT, people of color, or both. For those who seek that out in fiction, this collection is a must. I also liked how they wander around from story to story, so you get to check up on them and see how they're doing. I've never encountered an author who did that before and thought it was neat.

Seriously, though, Ms. Oyeyemi - get on that speeding YA train. We need more stories about bad-ass young women! ;)

3 stars!

Lucy Banks says

I received a copy of this book from Netgalley, in exchange for an honest review.

4.5 stars

An engrossing, often elusive collection of short stories...

I'd heard great things about this book, so was very excited to hear that I'd received a copy. I wasn't quite sure what to expect though; some reviewers raved about it, others seemed a little baffled, so my curiosity was piqued!

My opinion? Oyeyemi is a highly original writer, and I love the fact that she's uncompromising. She doesn't simplify things for the benefit of the reader; in fact, every short story is designed to make you *think...* and think hard!

For me, some of the stories were more successful than others. The opening tale - *books and roses* is startlingly beautiful and deeply mysterious; right from the get-go, Oyeyemi establishes herself as a master of powerful storytelling. I loved the dramatic juxtaposition of the next story, *sorry doesn't sweeten her tea*, a far more modern story, but no less perplexing and ungraspable. *Drownings* was another tale that stuck out for me; it had a mythical, timeless quality to it, with a tyrant that's over-fond of drowning his subjects, a communicative dog and a key thrown in a fire...

Characters reappear in later tales like echoes - sometimes frustratingly, at other times with perfect delicacy. It's a collection of stories that probably needs to be read a few times to try to delve into its secrets - but perhaps that's the whole *idea* of it... these stories aren't ever truly ours, and their secrets aren't ours to possess...!

I'll be looking out for more from this author.

Suzanne says

3.5 stars rounded down to 3.

A somewhat mixed but still magical bag from Helen Oyeyemi. Although her prose is memorable and unparalleled and her ability to craft a story is a thing of wonder, there's always a severe degree of disconnect from her narrative that keeps the reader from being fully immersed - something where the pieces are all there on the page, all the key elements of a good story, but it leaves me wanting something more, a more tangible way of understanding the motives of her characters. These flaws are forgivable because she's so wonderful at what she does, though.

These gems bring to mind Angela Carter's short stories. Oyeyemi is a more than worthy successor to the crown, taking her wayward women (and men and puppets) to the next level. These are bittersweet non-fairytales where the characters are often unlikable, selfish, unruly, irrational, slightly too whimsical. The overarching element between these loosely connected stories is keys of all sorts. They fit into some stories more seamlessly than others. There are times when it seems thematically ingenious and essential, and others where it's all too predictable, almost an afterthought, a jigsaw piece that doesn't fit.

Best stories:

Blood and Roses - A baby girl is left at a monastery with a mysterious key and instructions to wait. The collection is worth it for this alone. Wish this was an entire full-length novel because there's so much potential here, and revelations feel rushed.

Is your blood as red as this? - Pinocchio on steroids is the best way I can describe this one. Sinister and nightmarish happenings at a school of puppetry.

Drownings - A tyrant who drowns those who dare to defy him gets his comeuppance.

Zara says

Gave up. Really sorry, book clubbers. But, I'm gonna die one day, and I just can't waste my precious reading time on stuff that's trying so painfully hard to be weird and shocking.
