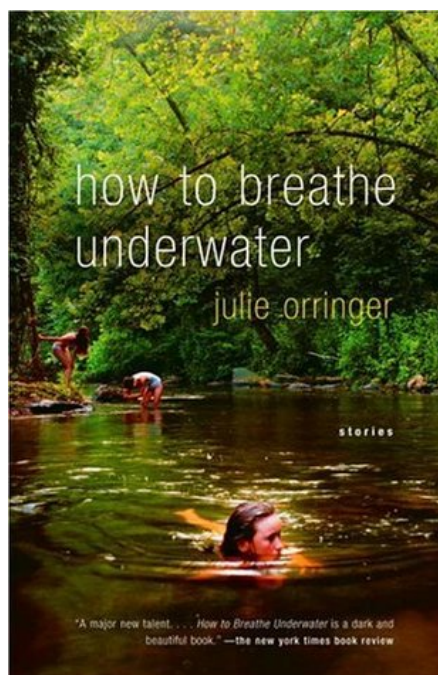




How to Breathe Underwater

Julie Orringer

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How to Breathe Underwater Julie Orringer

Nine brave, wise, and spellbinding stories make up this award-winning debut. In "When She is Old and I Am Famous" a young woman confronts the inscrutable power of her cousin's beauty. In "Note to Sixth-Grade Self" a band of popular girls exerts its social power over an awkward outcast. In "Isabel Fish" fourteen-year-old Maddy learns to scuba dive in order to mend her family after a terrible accident. Alive with the victories, humiliations, and tragedies of youth, *How to Breathe Underwater* illuminates this powerful territory with striking grace and intelligence.

How to Breathe Underwater Details

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From Reader Review How to Breathe Underwater for online ebook

Jaksen says

Yikes, I finally made my way through this fairly slender book of short stories.

And I didn't like them.

The characters in these stories all inhabit a rather bleak landscape - not the external environment, mind you, but the one inside them, their interior selves. Bleak, bleak, bleak. They are passive, bystanders, poor decision-makers, or they don't make decisions at all. They allow others to make them. They watch as awful things are done to them, or to others, and they just stand there. When one character does 'make a stand' (and with a gun), it's only after a series of stupid things she allows to happen. So a gun, okay makes sense. It's a quick fix to a situation that could have gone a dozen different - and more interesting - ways.

I had trouble just reading these. They felt cold, angry, disillusioned, depressing. Time and time again something truly awful happens and the MC just stands there. I'm not kidding. They might talk out - in their head - what they should do, but they don't.

So from what POV am I coming? From being an introvert in a family of not-introverts. In the family circle I lived in - grandparents next door; large family of cousins across the street; other cousins all over town; three kids in my family with a 'functioning' mom and dad - almost EVERYONE was a freaking EXTROVERT. So talk about passivity? Me, being one of three introverts in that huge crowd, that should have been my deal. Go hide. Be quiet. Escape. But I didn't. I stood up for myself and I did things.

So when I see a book about a lot of passive characters, most of whom are drowning in their bleak little lives, (and who only occasionally struggle to get to the surface), I go WTH? There is very little hope here. Or sense of direction. Or a feeling that if you read an 'update' about these people that very much has changed. Yeah, change is hard, but it takes guts.

I don't see much guts in any of these characters and I didn't like any of them.

Mark says

"Tonight, for the first time, I'll begin to know what my fish have known all their lives: how to breathe underwater."

In these nine stories, which center around, children, teens or young adults, mostly female, we take a peek at the difficulties of growing up, dealing with tragedy and loss, peer pressure and finding one's identity. These stories also touch on sexuality, religion and addiction, written in a nearly, hypnotic narrative style, with an ominous tone, lingering just below the surface.

This is an amazing accomplishment, especially for a debut collection. I hope she returns to this form.

Katie Lumsden says

Maybe 3.5. This collection was quite a mix for me. There were some stories - 'The Isabel Fish', 'When She is

Old and I am Famous', which I adored, but others that either moved me little or I felt were a bit unrealistic and bordering on melodrama. Saying that, there were some really poignant and lovely moments here and some very interesting explorations of what it is like to grow up.

Ferdy says

Enjoyed most of the stories, they were well written and had engaging characters and interesting enough plots, but on the whole there was nothing really memorable or spectacular about the collection.

Liked how the focus on each story was on young girls/women and the various issues they faced. Wasn't impressed with all the female hating going on though, most of the main characters hated other girls or had to deal with over the top bitchy females. It was a bit much.

When She Is Old and I Am Famous, The Isabel Fish, Care, and Stations of the Cross were the stories that stood out the most to me, they were poignant and engrossing and managed to capture the protagonists feelings and thoughts in a realistic and evocative way. In comparison the other stories weren't as affecting or entertaining, they were still somewhat enjoyable to read though.

Jessica says

Thick, THICK description, very tangible scenes that she puts you in and really makes you see and feel and smell, etc. Great writing. Subject matter of some a bit wearying, in that dramatic life's-just-oh-so-tragic short story kind of way, but that might just be me and my personal hangups. I'm so tired of everyone and their literary fucking drug addictions and fatal car crashes and dead parents and what have you! But then, what is it I want people to be writing about instead? I have no idea. Winning contests? Vacuuming? Playing with a puppy? Anyway, Orringer's a very good writer and I'm extremely jealous of her because she's around my age and I'd prefer if good writers would always be substantially older.... Or at least weird-looking? I hate it when people are prettier than me and also very talented. Oh well, such is life. I should be used to it by now.

Caroline says

NO SPOILERS

How to Breathe Underwater or, *Feeling Like a Fish Out of Water*. That's what Julie Orringer has done most successfully in this collection of nine pensive short stories that concern girls and young women--captured what it feels like to be out of one's comfort zone. In one story, a girl feels awkward in an unfamiliar family's home during an unconventional Thanksgiving. In another, an insecure young woman feels constant discomfort in the presence of her model cousin. In yet another, a school girl is reminded daily of just how much she doesn't fit in with the mean-girl clique. Orringer cut to the quick well--and therein lies one of the collection's problems; the stories view the world through too cynical a lens. This author overdid it. The end of one story sums this up. Just when it seems a protagonist's crush is finally, surely going to bring some light into her life, he doesn't. Orringer ties it up by stating all will stay the same for this poor miserable main character. On the one hand, this kind of harsh realism is bold and takes courage to depict, but on the other, it's unsatisfying for the reader. That's just the fact of the matter, and authors should be aware of it. If they're

to be as strong as they can be, even the saddest stories need at least a tiny flicker of hope.

Orringer has much experience with the short story format; prior to *How to Breathe Underwater*, she was published in several literary journals, such as *Ploughshares*, *The Paris Review*, and *The Yale Review*, so it's ironic that one of her bigger problems was that she was too ambitious with each story. She attempted to explore everything from drug abuse to teenage sexual desire to child psychopathy. In the first story alone she tackled three themes that are too emotionally complex to succeed within the confines of the short story format. Disappointingly, nothing in this collection is fully realized, and though her effort to do so is apparent, Orringer didn't *really* say anything of tremendous substance about the human condition. These stories are too cursory an examination to hold much, if any, great significance, but she did want very badly for them to be deeply significant.

Orringer needed help wrapping it all up. Many of these stories conclude poorly or lack resolutions. This is not the same as up-to-interpretation endings; these are incomplete, as if she thought a simple period at the end was an acceptable finale. "Care" is a prime example. The format doesn't quite work in "Note to Sixth Grade Self," and the point-of-view in "What We Save" is clunky to the point of distraction. This story is one that, like all the others, is narrated by a young female, but "What We Save" needs to be narrated by the mother. Because she wanted it for her collection about girls and young women, though, Orringer forced it.

Rounding out the collection is "Stations of the Cross." Orringer was enthusiastic about symbolism, and it's heavy-handed in some stories but is egregiously heavy-handed here. This story also contains a factual error regarding the sacrament of Holy Communion that will be glaring to Catholic readers.

Some of these short stories end worse than others, and it's odd that Orringer chose "Stations of the Cross," one of the most disturbing, as the collection's swan song. It was a bad move. All it does is draw attention to the overall despondency of the collection. If a few tears are shed by the end, it's not because *How to Breathe Underwater* stirred the soul but rather, induced depression.

Final verdict: Fans of coming-of-age stories will be attracted to *How to Breathe Underwater* but should look elsewhere for stories that genuinely satisfy.

Vanessa says

4.5 stars.

This to me was a near perfect short story collection, and that is a lot coming from me because I usually find short story collections a mixed bag - particularly when the stories are by an author I've never read before. I am so glad I picked up this collection by Julie Orringer, as not only is it a beautiful book but I also enjoyed almost every story in it.

The stories in this collection are told from the point of view of young girls or young women, and they touch on a range of subjects including loss of virginity, religion, personal appearance, drug addiction, and death. The stories aren't uplifting, but they stayed with me - even the shorter stories where not much happened, I was still left pondering the significance of the characters' actions.

My personal favourites from this collection were:

Note to Sixth-Grade Self - A story of bullying and loneliness, that has an interesting present tense narration but seems to reflect on past events, and felt incredibly bittersweet upon finishing.

What We Save - A girl deals with the complex emotions she feels during a trip to Disneyland with her dying

mother, and their day with her childhood sweetheart's family.

Pilgrims - A quite frankly messed up tale of children allowed to run amok even amongst their parents, with a dark twist and a disturbing atmosphere left behind.

I would highly recommend this short story collection to anyone, but particularly to those who are interested in coming-of-age tales and stories about young people having to take on the emotions and responsibilities of much older people.

Daniel Chaikin says

46. How to Breathe Underwater : Stories by Julie Orringer

published: 2003

format: 226 page trade paperback

acquired: borrowed from library

read: July 10, 20-23

rating: 4 stars

(side note: This was my second consecutive book by a South Florida author. They grew up both in time and place very close to where I did, and in a world very similar to mine. I like to think that affected my response.)

Let's not jump to conclusions. This collection has a lot to offer, if you let it. It was a great experience for me. But I cannot come with a positive way to introduce them. The killer intro goes something like this - this is a collection of sad stories from the perspective of passive teenage and pre-teen girls, in a style that has clear links/lineage to the notorious now-unoriginal Iowa Writer's Workshop. And it lives in that era of technological transition, the far off 1990's when the internet was still peripheral. These characters still used cassette decks in their cars, even though CD's were better, and they used film(!). That all seems like a lot to be up against. Sure, there is a dark humor, and stories that consistently evolve, through their own structure, into something more. Well, that last bit is a lot, no?

I was wondering, as I read these short stories, whether they might be in the order she wrote them. Probably not, but it would make sense because there is an evolution. The early stories push to extremes. The character can't just lean over the edge, you know...well, that's a spoiler, sorry. Anyway, the writer is arguably forcing the issue, except that the stories still work. I liked them. The middle stories are notable for their strong endings. I don't mean something clever happens. I mean, the stories build to this ending, and the endings do lots of really good things all at once. They are simply terrific. The lead-in to that end, though, can be kind of plain and unoriginal. The extremes fade out. The later stories just feel more mature. There is no need for extremes. The setting can be unoriginal, but takes are - how can I say - there is a lot going on, throughout. No more need for a ending to resuscitate, even the construction is working.

But, that's just me being wordy and silly. These are dark humor takes on the lives of young girls. They tend to be Jewish, they tend to be passive, and they tend to have some very tough experiences. Sometimes the stories are just dark. And sometimes they more than that. They can cathartic, and they can touching and they can just be really nice stories, whatever that means. And there is, I think, a struggle in them. An author is trying to be original, and trying to both use and get out of that IWW story-killing funk. But these stories are here because they are successful and do manage that. I thought they were terrific.

Notes, story by story:

Pilgrims

New Orleans alternative Thanksgiving from hell. Story goes to limit, then crosses, so to speak.

When She is Old and Famous

Good and bad, but interesting overall, regardless. The main characters, Americans in Italy, are unrealistic extremes, and unoriginal in their contrast. One is a successful model as a teenager, and the other is, apparently, an unrealistically promising, overweight unattractive artist.

Isabel the Fish

The main character is survivor of a crash that killed her brother's girlfriend. Note that ending was really nice, makes up for the all the awkward and unoriginal aspects of the rest of the story. These strong endings becomes more of a theme in the later stories.

Note to Sixth-Grade Self

Written in the format of instructions and advise. This works, but, if not for the ending, this story stinks. Ending hits a lot of good notes. The rest of the story reads like something she turned in for an Iowa Writer's Workshop assignment

The Smoothest Way is Full of Stones

This story hit a lot of high notes for me. I loved the setting, that of a reformed Jew, younger (?) teenager in an orthodox Jewish setting and sincerely trying to fit in. It gives this story a lot of spirit and cathartic sense - and that's just one aspect. Another strong ending. My favorite story.

Care

Dark humor in San Francisco, as the druggy young aunt cares for her 6-yr-old niece for the day, fighting drug craving and toeing the edge of sanity and disaster the whole time. Fun. Very IWW too.

Stars of Motown Shining Bright

Another strong ending takes a moderately good story and makes it very good. An very entertaining take on Chekhov's gun. Dark humor throughout.

What We Save

Another really strong story, but it works the whole way. Mom, dying of cancer, takes Helena and her sister to Disney World to meet her high school sweetheart and his family. Helena takes in a lot of tough stuff. There is dark humor, but mostly, again because of that end part, this is touching and really sad. All gears in use here.

Stations of the Cross

If these stories are in the order they were actually written, I wouldn't be surprised. Because they get stronger and the author maturity improves. This is the story of a really confident writer. The setting is cliché, black kid in the religious/conservative southern white world, and the ending is only ok, but the story works in every way.

Alexa says

Upsetting, but in that good cathartic way. I like how she circles around the same issues (competitive female friendships, mothers with cancer, religion) without being proscriptive or preachy about any conclusions. The titular story was my favorite, the first one was my least favorite.

yh says

Reading these stories felt like a friend was telling me deep, personal stories from her life; like she wanted me to understand a part of her life that was difficult and complicated and that I hadn't really experienced myself. These stories of childhood, of growing up, and of young adulthood, were stories I felt could have come from any number of friends I had growing up, mostly because they generally dealt with suburban middle class families and schools, but also because they felt so real and raw.

Every story in this book is memorable, a surprising feat given that their plots and characters are so similar. Each story puts its heroine or someone around her whom she cares about in an isolated position (generally by making them social outcasts) and tells the reader how she works through it: the kinds of feelings that are present, the state of the world around her, the horrifying deeds that others commit around her, and the sometimes heartbreaking consequences of her thoughts and actions. They're focused solely on conveying an experience, and describing it to the best of the narrator's ability, which shifts depending on the story. The main character ranges in age from about ten to about thirty, with the majority sitting under the age of twenty, and the change in tone and level of detail depending on the main character's maturity is well-executed, and makes each story feel more authentic.

After almost every story, I had to take a deep breath to collect myself. Even though the stories all come from the same place as far as the characters involved and the basic conflicts, I felt different emotions after each one, ranging from disgust to sadness to horror to sympathy. The way that each character deals with the isolation in her life as well as some of the awful things that happen to her is unique but always compelling and resonant.

If you didn't notice, I'm having a hard time writing about this book. This is because I can only think of so many ways to say that this book made me feel many feelings. There are some small missteps here and there, and some stories work much better than others, but taken as a whole, this is a very high-quality collection of realistic, personal writing that I thought was extremely well-written.

I do wonder what it would take for me to dislike writing that is so personal; it kind of feels like I would like any writing that has that quality. I think it's probably a quirk of my age and personality at this given moment that I feel that way, but I guess I mention this because I'm not sure how reliable I can be as a judge of quality when the content is so realistic and emotional. I will say, however, that I really enjoyed Orringer's prose, particularly the way in which she infuses the narration with the personality of the narrator herself, and I think this collection is probably worth checking out for that alone.

Whenever I read reviews of short story collections, I find myself searching the text for mentions of my favorites or least favorites because I'm curious what the reviewer thought of those stories in particular. Since I am having such a hard time with this review, I'll end it by presenting some quick, spoilery thoughts about each of the stories.

(view spoiler)

Claire Fuller says

I first read this in about 2005 as a library book, before I'd ever thought about being a writer myself, and I absolutely loved it. It was one of those books that made me want to see if I could write (not sure that I'll ever achieve this though). Since then I've often looked for it bookshops but never found it, and then a month or so ago I decided to order it from my local indie bookshop, and although I have two other books on the go, I had to start it as soon as it arrived. And I still love it just as much. Each story is perfect in their own way: the writing, the plots, where they end, the characters. All of them... well okay, I still have my standout favourites: Pilgrims, and The Isabel Fish, but there really isn't a duff story in the whole collection.

Highly recommended.

Imi says

Read as part of the Summer 2016 LTWF group read

I was hugely impressed by just how skillfully crafted and well balanced this collection is. Too often short story collections can feel uneven and disconnected, but this collection felt very well thought out, structured around deeply personal and devastating issues faced by girls during childhood and young adulthood, such as death and illness, guilt, loss, jealousy, peer pressure and finding one's identity. Of course I had my favourites, and then a few of the stories that didn't resonate quite so much with me personally, but overall I think each of the nine stories were a good fit and deserving of their place in the collection.

None of these stories are particularly cheerful. In fact, perhaps ironically, the collection is named after the only story in the collection to be in any way particularly hopeful. All of these girls are struggling with personal problems, as they try "to breathe underwater", often trapped and isolated in desperate circumstances. The titular story was without a doubt a favourite of mine, thanks to the this beautiful sense of hope within the protagonist who I truly admired. That is not to say the other stories aren't excellent, simply that when story after story ends on such sadness and lack of hope, it can be difficult to keep reading.

Despite this difficulty, I admire Orringer's ability to convey such dark and disturbing themes. Her stories were powerful, and many of the scenarios and characters will stay with me for a long time. They've got me thinking and certainly sparked some interesting discussions between those who read this as part of a group read. A must read for fans of well written short stories, especially if you are interested in the trials and tribulations of growing up, but be prepared for a dark and difficult read.

Lisa Vegan says

Collection of lovely short stories about children and adolescents. Very dark themes. They brought up a lot of emotions for me. Long after reading this book, I found myself thinking of certain of the stories. Each story is complete; she really knows how to write short stories well.

Sabrina says

Wow. This is an incredible collection and I loved each story. Read this!!

Kim says

I can't really express how much this book affected me. I was thinking I might just skip the review thingy and just leave it as 'holy shit' and be done with it. Of course, I can't do that. It's been 3 days since I finished it and I find myself going back and rereading lines and calling up scenes. Why? Because these characters are better than me and I live in retrospect. These stories pull at my gut and bring me back to times where 'shoulda' and 'maybe if' exist even though I know I can never go back and undo what has happened. Those events and my actions are a part of me. They are noxious memories that cannot be candy coated. My bad.

Maybe I am a stereotype. One that writers can hone in on and know that I am where the \$\$\$ is at. I seem to be drawn to a certain classification. Motherless-child-of-cancer-who-has-many-regrets (read: Catholic Guilt)-and-is-stunted-therefore-never-learning-how-to-be-a-real-grownup! Lorrie Moore, Susan Minot, Sonya Sones ...they nail it. Now I can add Julie Orringer to the list. She captures the little girl who is strong when she has every reason not to be. She empowers these girls. Not all are part of the above classification. Some are just young girls thrown into situations that shape them.. Show how fierce they can be. I so admire this. This was so not me. I was invisible. My mom was dying and I ignored it. I fought with her, I didn't listen to her medical updates, I turned up my radio when she was crying in the next room. I was angry that her illness took over my life. I was forced to babysit and cook dinner and clean up. I was 12 and hiding outside until after dark so I wouldn't have to deal with the sighs of pain or the blank look in her face. I was 13 and staying over at a friend's house, pretending that I was a normal girl with a normal life. I was 14 and wretching as I cleaned her hair out of the drain. What a bitch.

The girls in these stories are who I wish I had been. Helena in **'What We Save'** who watches her mom shrink away and assumes the role of caregiver. Mira, the strong artist with the supermodel cousin in **'When She is Old and I am Famous'** who doubts her talents yet still doesn't pretend to be someone other than who she is. Ella in **'Pilgrims'**-- silent yet always seeing, always aware even when her parents are grabbing onto whatever fad might help them. (I was 15 and being dragged to church to pray when we had never really prayed before and what the hell would God do *now*?) Maddy in **'The Isabel Fish'** -oh, Maddy, you might just be my favorite.. With your inner monologue--such perception!

I was 17, leaving home as soon as the diploma was in my sweaty hands. Running away seemed the best choice. I hid behind a thin wall of pretend adulthood. Set my own rules, see what I want to see, no silicone breasts or wigs or bottles upon bottles of medications set out with such reverence. Cancer dropped from my vocabulary.

I was 18 and my mother was nothing more than a skeleton. In the 5 months since I had moved she had withered. I couldn't look her in the eye. I couldn't say I was sorry. I couldn't admit that I was so very wrong in the way I treated her.

These girls... they are incredible and I thank Julie for putting them to paper, fleshing them out, giving me a chance to know them and pretend I had chosen a different path.

Julie Christine says

Orringer writes with confidence, but without much passion. These nine stories are perfectly constructed, and the author has a keen ear for natural dialogue, but with few exceptions, I was not moved by the characters or their dilemmas.

In each, whether the voice is first or third person (even, in the case of *Note to Sixth-Grade Self*, second person), the protagonist is a young girl or a coming of age adolescent. Each faces a significant loss- either of a loved one or of innocence. Very high marks to *Pilgrims*, a subtle homage to *Lord of the Flies*, and *Note to Sixth-Grade Self*; these stories spill out the inherent, almost innocent cruelty of children. Shrugs to *Stars of Motown Shining Bright* and *The Smoothest Way Is Full of Stones*, both centered on characters discovering and exploring their sexual selves, and *When She Is Old and I Am Famous*, which was entertaining but empty.

Less than the themes, which did not always resonate with me, was Orringer's writing. It's very modern and linear, clean and sharp. I admire this, but there was no place to escape and rest for a moment. *The Isabel Fish* and *Care* came very close, as the characters slipped quietly into depression or a drug-induced high. But those aren't places in which I wanted to linger.

Cheryl says

Orringer knows how to tackle serious issues with just the right tact: *The Invisible Bridge* was a favorite of mine and this book of short stories was a lovely read.

I love when short story collections have a similar thread. All the characters in this book are making their way from childhood to adolescence and they are trying to breathe underwater. The stories have death or impending death as underlying themes, but they're not all dark because there is a buoyancy that accompanies each theme and character.

A couple of my favorites. "Pilgrims," where little Ella's family must make a trip to a group of nature healers in New Orleans to help her mom's cancer. Instead of focusing on the cancer-ridden mom, the focus is on the point of view from the children of cancer parents. In "The Isabel Fish," a teenager deals with the death of her brother's girlfriend, who was driving her home; In "When She is Old and I am Famous," Mira, an artist, is insecure around her model cousin, Aida. "Aida. That is her terrible name. Ai-ee-duh: two cries of pain and one of stupidity." The males Mira hangs with all seem to love Aida--even when they catch her in a lie. Mira is left to marvel at her cousin's confidence and arrogance: "The little bitch is a prodigy, a skinny Venus, a genius, she knows how to shake it. She will never be at a loss for work or money. She is a human dollar sign. Prada has made millions on her. And still her eyes remain clear and she gets enough sleep at night." At the end of this story, as with all the stories in this collection, is a parable that sums up the interesting twists and turns in these plots.

The stories manage to tackle major issues that teenagers deal with: drugs, sexuality, image, family, divorce, sickness, conformity, race. There were so many things done artistically here that I couldn't help but pause and admire periodically. It was a short and interesting read, though at times, I wished for more closure at the end of a couple of stories.

Donna says

Are you looking for a collection of short stories about the trials and tribulations of growing up that's ultimately inspirational and uplifting? You won't find it here in this book which maybe should have been titled "How to Read Underwater." This is because I felt I was drowning in misery nearly the entire time I was reading it, often needing breaks to surface and inhale.

That's not to say that the stories aren't well written since they are, or that they aren't realistic since most of them are very genuine and astute when it comes to showcasing the confusing process of growing up, especially for the girls and young women featured in this book. But this book is imbalanced and focuses mainly on traumatic experiences of children or young women who are left to navigate a treacherous world on their own. I can never comprehend collections such as this that show very little variety and very little optimism or hope, and instead choose to focus on the negative and how inhumane or neglectful people can be toward one another when caught up in themselves. I can watch the evening news or read the daily newspaper for a heavy dose of that. When I read a book such as this, I want to read how people survive such challenges and not merely read about the misery caused by them. I wished to sit down with the author and ask about her purpose for writing a collection of stories that show young people at the mercy of others who show little mercy. It seems she's adding to the misery she writes about instead of showing ways to cope or survive when things can't or won't change, at least for the time being.

Rant over. The writing is excellent in this book. The author knows how to unfold a story, beginning in the center then peeling back corners to reveal what came before and what is to come. These stories engaged me even as they repelled me for the most part. Though there were a few exceptions where the stories ended on a hopeful note. My favorite was titled "The Isabel Fish" which was about a teenaged sister and brother's relationship in the aftermath of a tragic accident.

So if you're looking for a short story collection with some excellent writing about various difficult situations faced mainly by females when growing up, and you don't mind bleakness with only a few rays of hope to sustain you, this book might be a satisfying read for you. As for me, I read to be entertained, or to learn something, or to be inspired, or to feel part of something bigger than myself. These stories are small in scope with their mostly bitter bites of life--physical and emotional cruelty, bullying, guilt, shame, sickness--and they had me coming away with the need for fresh air and a dose of human kindness.

Caroline says

I didn't like the first two stories, but plodded on regardless, and I am glad I did so. The other stories were excellent, or perhaps by then I'd got into the rhythm and perspectives of Julie Orringer's way of seeing.

Pilgrims.

A sick mom. The family visits a hippie household seemingly hoping for therapeutic intervention. The household has several children, one of whom appears to be a sociopath. A cruel and nasty child. He terrorizes some of the other children, whilst the adults are busy doing their thing. Not a happy ending.

When She Is Old and I Am Famous.

Tedious teenage artist views her cousin, a tedious teenage fashion model, with a mixture of envy and dislike.

"I imagine myself sitting on this ledge with Aida, when she is old and I am famous. She will look at me as if I take up too much space, and I will want to push her into the Arno. But perhaps by then we will love ourselves less fiercely. Perhaps the edges of our mutual hate will have worn away, and we will have already said the things that need to be said."

The Isobel Fish

I liked this one a lot.

A teenage boy teases his sister nastily. She was with his girlfriend when her car went into a river, and the girlfriend drowned. We feel he holds the sister to blame. Eventually the his nastiness culminates in him killing some of his sister's precious fish. It makes for a turning point, and he confesses that he feels he was a terrible boyfriend to his dead girlfriend. We sense a new kindness, and that in future his relations with his sister will be better.

Note to Sixth-Grade Self

A brilliant exploration of the courage, the hopefulness, the bullying, the optimism and the pessimism of being an unpopular teenager. At one stage, obviously in an effort to give her confidence, her father teaches her how to dance....in fact her parents give her an hour long demonstration of how to dance. I feel that with parents like that there is hope for her finding a happy future, in spite of the great unkindness of some of her peers.

The Smoothest Way is Full of Stones

Love and the first strivings with sexual feeling in the teenagers in two families. One an orthodox Jewish family, and the second a family that is not orthodox. I enjoyed the exploration of their different perspectives in this respect.

The story is also beautifully evocative.

"Real bees weave above me through the grass, their bodies so velvety I want to touch them.....There is a presence gathering around me, an iridescent light I can see through my laced eyelashes. I lie still against the earth, faint with dread, and I feel the planet spinning through space, its dizzying momentum, its unstoppable speed."

I also loved the sensuality and gentle surprise of the ending.

Care

Drug addict aunt takes *care* of her sister's six year old daughter. I was on tenterhooks throughout wondering what would happen next as this rather out-of-it young woman takes care of her prissy niece for the day. Wonderfully written and very gripping.

Stars of Motion Shining Bright

Two fifteen year old girls in love with the same man. A slime ball who teaches pilates and weight training at a fitness club in Bel Air. Everything about him oozes cheap bad boy appeal.

He gave her a moist smile. "Let's not worry about all that tonight. We should just have a good time. We know how to have a good time together, don't we?" He put a hand on her arm and rubbed the inside of her wrist with his thumb.

Yuk, yuk, yuk. But happily he gets his come uppance. A great yarn.

What We Save

A sad and tender story about a dying mother's visit to Disneyland with her two daughters. There she meets up with an old boyfriend and his family. One of the sons of that family tries to assault the older daughter on one of the rides. But most of all, over everything, hangs the pall of the mother's illness, and her nostalgia for her earlier relationship with the man. All in all a very sad story.

Stations of the Cross

Yikes, another sociopath. Some distressing family dynamics reverberating down the years to the current day, but most of all, a nasty little girl being nasty.

Okay, so this book got off to a slow start, but after that I could hardly put it down... I thought it was an excellent read.

Carmen says

So. The overarching themes of this book seem to be:

- Children should be listened to and paid attention to. Children are adults' links to the real world; a grounding force that is there to stabilize adults if they bother to involve themselves in their children's lives and pay attention to the details of children's existence.
- Males are at worst rapists and sexual predators, and at best clumsy and inept.
- People in general are cruel, unfeeling jerks.
- If you are not a helicopter parent who monitors her/his children's every move, your children will
 - a.) be raped (if they are female)
 - b.) rape someone (if they are male)
 - c.) murder someone
 - d.) be murdered by other children - (this seriously happens in more than one story, not sure how Orringer grew up but this concerns me)

This book of short stories is depressing with undertones of Flannery O'Connor. Whether you feel this is a compliment or not depends on how you feel about O'Connor. The stories, while dark, are strong and arresting, but not pleasant or enjoyable.

Cancer, being Jewish, and girls age 15 and younger being sexually fucked-with to varying degrees are all themes in these stories.

Let's break it down:

1.) PILGRIMS

Children with a mom (view spoiler)

She wished she were sitting in one of those wrought-iron chairs and shaking powdered sugar onto a beignet. How much better than to be surrounded by strangers, eating food that tasted like the bottom of the sea.
...

At the kitchen table, men and women with long hair and loose clothes sliced vegetables or stirred things into bowls. Some of them wore knitted hats like her mother, their skin dull-gray, their eyes purple-shaded underneath. To Ella it seemed they could be relatives of her mother's, shameful cousins recently discovered.
...

"Your mother is upstairs," Delilah said, her eyes swiveling toward some distant hidden room. "She felt a little swimmy-headed. Your dad just took her some special tea. Maybe we should let her rest, hmm?"

2.) WHEN SHE IS OLD AND I AM FAMOUS

This is a story about a fat girl who is an artist who has a skinny, beautiful model cousin. She is sad because she is fat and a virgin and no men are interested in her, but they all want to fuck her cousin. Her cousin is a mean person, but I guess it's "okay" because "she's had a hard life" or some shit, whatever excuses people use to explain someone's inexcusable behavior.

I liked this story because there were some good insights in it, but I do think Orringer is perpetuating some myths here. Did we really need the ten billionth retelling of the myth "fat girls don't get laid - subtitle: unless they make themselves into "easy" "loose" girls and allow men to fuck them in the dark or some shit or with bags over their heads or some shit." Fuck.

Please don't believe the media. Fat girls/women can and do have meaningful and fulfilling loving relationships with men. This whole idea that fat women are sex-starved pariahs living on the edge of society waiting for scraps to be thrown to them is a crock of shit. If you are a fat girl or a fat woman and you are reading this and you are convinced being fat makes you unlovable - this is NOT true. Please love yourself and respect yourself enough not to devalue yourself because society devalues you. Don't believe any of this shit.

Rarely do I see this flipped in the media SO RARELY. In real life I know neurotic, thin women who are model-looking and perfectly coiffed but pale in comparison to their fat friends who not only laugh, love, and live extensively but have such a happy and fun life. This isn't a rule - obviously there are lots of fat women who hate themselves and hide themselves thanks to media and society pressure - but it happens, and it almost never happens in fiction. The only movie that was even close to hinting at this was *How To Be Single* where fat Robin out-shone, out-fucked her thin friend and relaxed and had a good time while her anxious, thin, traditionally-beautiful friend wrung her hands nervously in a corner. Usually everyone would be relating and wanting to be Alice in the movie, this was a rare one in which it was far more appealing for the audience to imagine themselves as Robin - fearless, fun, and flirty. Pinched and neurotic Alice was insecure, needy, and worked her already complicated relationships into needless knots.

ANYWAY, I'm just saying Orringer would have been more interesting if she'd bucked tradition here. It seemed like she was GOING to, but then it was a false alarm, sadly.

However, this was one of the better stories in the collection.

Isn't it funny, how I've learned to say it? I am fat. I am not skin or muscle or gristle or bone. What I am, the part of my body that I most am, is fat. Continuous, white, lighter than water, a source of energy. No one can hold all of me at once. Does this constitute a crime? I know how to carry myself. Sometimes I feel almost graceful. But all around I hear the thin people's bombast: Get Rid of Flabby Thighs Now! Avoid Holiday Weight-Gain Nightmares! Lose Those Last Five Pounds! What is left of a woman once her last five pounds are gone?

...

It doesn't matter what the Baroque masters thought. The big breasts, the lush bodies, those are museum pieces now, and who cares if they stand for fertility and plenty, wealth and gluttony, or the fullest bloom of youth? Ruben's nudes made of cumulus clouds, Titian's milky half-dressed beauties overflowing their garments, Lorenzo Lotto's big intelligent-eyed Madonnas - they have their place, and it is on a wall.

3.) THE ISABEL FISH

A 14-year-old girl tries to deal with her asshole older brother while her parents remain oblivious and uninvolved.

While Orringer is shooting to capture a 14-year-old girl here, the protagonist sounds AT THE YOUNGEST about 23. Epic fail on that count.

It's impossible to believe how gone she is, how untouchable. She's the only one who doesn't have to know what it's like here on Earth without her.

4.) NOTE TO A SIXTH-GRADE SELF

Pathetic whining and endless teenage angst and drama. I felt like stabbing someone while reading this. The most pointless story in the whole book.

I also hated how the protagonist - a tortured, bullied girl-child - reduced males in her class to appearances and physical traits. It was gross.

5.) THE SMOOTHEST WAY IS FULL OF STONES

Organized religion hates women and it hates sexual pleasure.

6.) CARE

Drug addiction is a disease and a brain disorder much like anorexia nervosa. Even though people falsely believe people with drug problems or ED can stop their behavior, their brain is altered by their conditions and they are unable to think or act rationally. I wouldn't say I *liked* this story but it was an accurate and thoughtful portrayal of a drug addict.

7.) STARS OF MOTOWN SHINING BRIGHT

I wasn't sure I was going to be able to stomach the teenage angst, drama, and stupidity in this - not to mention Orringer's continuing theme of men-are-slimeballs-and-most-likely-rapists. However, I think this was my favorite story in the collection, with Orringer carrying this plot all the way to the end in a way I think was brave and unfaltering. A lesser author would have decided to make this sadder and more painful in order

to be 'deep' or something, but Orringer resists temptation.

But here she was, no longer a virgin, and in her hand she had this gun.

8.) WHAT WE SAVE

More uninvolved parents who have no idea what their cruel, rapist sons are up to or alternatively what their daughter just suffered through. More cancer. More males-are-shit. Highly depressing on numerous levels.

9.) STATIONS OF THE CROSS

Parents are completely ignorant of what their children - in this case cruel, racist, sadist children - are doing. Then when they find out, they hold their children's cruel and sadistic actions against them for the rest of their lives, never letting them forget it in some kind of cruel eternal punishment. Fucked on both ends. (view spoiler) Fuck! That's so fucked-up.

Tl;dr - Well, did that sounds charming and like you should read it immediately? LOL Orringer isn't a bad writer but I have to say her view of humanity - and her view of life - is a very dismal one. Not pleasant or enjoyable to read about.

2 out of 5 stars, I can't give this one star because Orringer is a good writer, with occasional glimmers of understanding humanity. However, she is unrelenting in her views that human beings are cruel, sadistic, and uncaring creatures and I can't back a book like that. There's not enough hope here for me to give this a good rating.

Proceed at your own risk.
