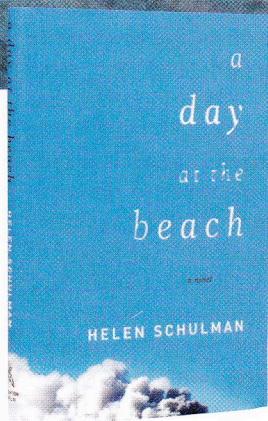


The Difference a Day Makes

The distance between a private crisis and a public tragedy shrinks to zero in the course of a novel's circadian cycle

A *Day at the Beach* (Houghton Mifflin), Helen Schulman's fourth novel, unfolds in a single day, lending it the feeling of a long exhalation of breath—except that, because this day is September 11, 2001, the breath comes out like a wail. On the next inhalation, the world would be different, forcing on all of us the question of whether we would be different, too.



Schulman

Gerhard Falktopf is a legendary choreographer, and his wife, Suzannah, is his principal dancer and greatest muse—a perfect symbiosis that blinds them to all the ways in which they don't fit, until their son, Nikolai, arrives with “more than the run-of-the-mill imperfections.” Suzannah becomes overwhelmed and insecure as a stay-at-home mother, but Gerhard is too consumed by a hostile takeover of his dance company to notice or particularly care. Shortly after the second plane strikes, not far from their TriBeCa loft, husband and wife flee to a borrowed mansion in the Hamptons, but they can't escape their growing estrangement. They spend much of the day apart, going through the motions of buying overpriced groceries at the painfully picturesque local market and feeding the overstuffed ducks at the town pond. But some chance encounters with strangers force them to confront the selves they jettisoned to be together, along with the truth about their troubled child—“this mirror, the fractured inheritor of their fractured world.”

Schulman bravely and skillfully illuminates the domino effect of the falling towers on people's psyches and lives, its instant and far-reaching reordering of priorities. For his part, Gerhard resolves to try to repair his home life after realizing that “art never saved anyone from anything.” He may be right, but *A Day at the Beach* succeeds in reminding us how, even in the face of terrible tragedy, a person can go on being alive—sometimes even more so than before.—BLISS BROYARD

BRAVE NEW WORLDLINESS

Marriage, Katie Roiphe writes in *Uncommon Arrangements* (Dial Press), “is the novel that most of us are living in.” In it she examines the unions of seven eminent Modernists—H.G. Wells, Katherine Mansfield, Elizabeth von Arnim, Vanessa Bell, Ottoline Morrell, Radclyffe Hall, and Vera Brittain—who were determined to live as inventively and honestly as they imagined post-Victorians should. Which meant, Roiphe shows us, that a third was often begrudgingly admitted to a party of two, feminists became entangled with men who hadn't quite rid themselves of a desire for an “angel in the house,” Bertrand Russell ended up dispensing romantic advice, Virginia Woolf tutted and sighed, and the children of these fluid households wrote embittered memoirs.

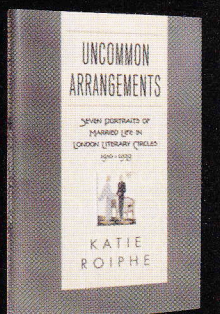
Roiphe's book couldn't help but be compelling entertainment. But readers familiar with the lives of the Bloomsbury set, as well as the work of Phyllis Rose, Hermione Lee, and Christine Stansell, may find it disappointing. Rather than taking command of the details she's judiciously collected, Roiphe is content to say only that they are “interesting,” and she seems afraid to take a position beyond stating the obvious—that the romances of those with wild imaginations can only end in tragedy.

This most important lesson of the book, however, may be that contemporary women might need to enlarge their resentments. “I think it was the only honest thing I could do,” Rebecca West wrote of her affair with Wells, “and not to have done so would have been an evasion, a sham adherence to standards I don't hold.” Unlike Roiphe's idealistic Modernists, we think we know better than to quarrel with sham



Roiphe

standards and institutions—look where the '60s got us—and we fixate instead on who didn't pick whom up from day care. In doing so, she suggests, we're perhaps as tragic a story as her tortured smart set.—CARLENE BAUER



PASSING THE BUCKS

Money can't buy happiness, but it sure would make life a hell of a lot easier for the characters in *Twenty Grand* (Harper Perennial), a debut collection of short stories by Rebecca Curtis. After proving to be a terrible waitress, the narrator of “Summer, With Twins” is left to consider other ways to earn her looming college tuition—including a nighttime assignation with her boss on his boat. “I wanted extra cash. But I didn't think I could do it,” she muses. “I'll pay you a thousand dollars, he said. Oh, I said. The money was staggering. But there was no way I would do it. All right, I said.”

And that's just for starters. The other 12 well-crafted tales here are also told from the vantage point of the have-nots—but even if they were to win the lottery, Curtis' subjects would retain their outsider status. A hefty bank balance may afford an auto mechanic a nicer boat, making it easier to fit in at the local yacht club, but it wouldn't help his stepdaughter resolve her attraction to the prom queen (“The Witches”). The stories Curtis weaves may, on the surface, seem to concern the myriad problems that come with not having enough Benjamins, but they actually describe experiences to which all of us can relate, regardless of tax bracket.—MEGAN DEEM



Curtis

