

## **Recipes for Endangered Species**

**by Traci O'Connor**

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**Reviewed by Andrew Shepperson**

Traci O'Connor begins her debut collection of short stories, *Recipes for Endangered Species*, with the following dedication: "for all us beautiful monsters." Given the dark subject matter of every story, it soon becomes evident that this dedication could apply as much to her characters as it could to her audience. With her frantic, highly poetic style, O'Connor leads the reader down razor sharp trails that seem to switch back and forth between worlds, the material and the supernatural, the real and the surreal. Though it may not be clear at times which of these worlds her characters are operating in, the stories move at such a fast pace and are wrought with such palpable tension and visceral details that it is clear that O'Connor has carefully chosen each and every word. Unwilling to hold the reader's hand, she has left many of these stories purposefully ambiguous, aiming to raise more questions about the nature of reality than any reader could ever hope to answer.

In the story "Starla and June," the narrator June takes out the frustrations and fears of her tumultuous relationship with her lover, Starla, by killing animals in her front yard and befriending a prosthetic hand that Starla has stolen from a pawn shop. The reader soon learns that Starla has stolen the hand because she herself lost three fingers in her childhood when a dog bit her. This also partially accounts for June's desire to and eventual killing of the neighbor's dog, which becomes an attempt to try and heal the couple's relationship as much as it is a brutal act of insanity. All the while, the prosthetic hand is constantly "ghosting" and watching June, commenting on her actions, and even starting up conversations from time to time. Again, the interpretation of the more speculative aspects of the story are entirely up to the reader, though O'Connor has clearly characterized June as someone who might just be imagining these

conversations, as she is also capable of killing an armadillo, a rabbit, and the neighbor's pet dog with her bare hands.

O'Connor creates many of the same effects in the story "Pleasure," this time using the third person to weave together the narratives of her two main characters, Sarah and John. The story begins with Sarah in the middle of a sexual encounter, one in which she is clearly hesitant to further and eager to end. John follows his mother's ghost out to the woods where Sarah and her boyfriend are having sex. He startles the two into stopping, and Sarah soon follows him back to his house, where Sarah sees his mother's ghost in a "long, satin gown—as if she has just come from a party." Even though Sarah has seen the ghost closely enough to describe her gown as "woven of maple leaves turned to wine velvet," she still denies seeing the ghost to John when he asks about it later in the driveway of his house. By using these beautiful, though perhaps imagined, details to create a mystical and vibrant world for the characters to inhabit and by once again leaving much of the story open to the reader's interpretation, "Pleasure" transcends the boundaries of the common ghost story and then becomes a commentary on love and loss.

Much like the dedication, the title of this collection, *Recipes for Endangered Species*, speaks both to the reader and the characters of the stories. After every story, O'Connor has included a cocktail recipe, perhaps offering her readers a way to deal with the dangerous, unseen forces that play such key roles in all of her stories. In any world, these stories would never be easy to completely comprehend, though they would always be enjoyable and disturbing, able to leave the reader satisfied and yet longing for answers they may not find in this lifetime. O'Connor writes in the story "Goat" that "the night swells and swells and then, like a violent summer storm, explodes." Such is the kind of menacing beauty found in *Recipes for Endangered Species*, which is a must read for those looking to be challenged as well as entertained.