

## Affect

**Charlene Elsby**

The Porcupine's Quill (Oct 14, 2020)

Softcover \$18.95 (152pp)

978-0-88984-437-7

*Affect is a surreal novel about death, love, existence, and nonexistence.*

A woman grapples with intense philosophical questions and romantic feelings for a classmate in Charlene Elsby's novel *Affect*.

She met Logan at the university where they share a philosophy class. From there, the unnamed narrator embarks on a cerebral yet emotional journey through all of the possibilities presented by her love for, and eventual relationship with, Logan. She tours and symbolically destroys her past and considers potential futures. Death, ruin, and betrayal are constants, but so is her affection for Logan.

The story begins before the narrator gathers the courage to talk to Logan. She observes him from afar in her unique way and, once they get together, continues to ruminate on their relationship to each other and the world around them. She constantly runs calculations about how Logan came to be himself, how her own actions may be perceived by Logan and others, and definitions of time and humanity. Her thoughts reveal the disturbing potential of ordinary events and conversations: more than one date with Logan ends in the violent death of strangers.

Much of the action takes place in the narrator's head; the line between fantasy and reality is all but nonexistent. Her story is punctuated by morbid thoughts, as when she imagines the many ways Logan could die on his way home from school. Other times, she falls into stream-of-consciousness thinking, as when she disassociates in a coffee shop; then, not even thoughts of Logan can ground her. Her rambling narration and tautologies emphasize the book's surreal, metaphorical nature.

Because the narrator is so removed from reality, her lengthy musings are sometimes pedantic or irritating. Through her eyes, the world and everyone in it is a mental experiment to be picked apart. She indulges in long monologues examining the limits of language and human perception. The narrative breaks apart, flickering from one disjointed thought to the next. These shifts demonstrate her dark, obsessive personality. To her, Logan is a marvel: every part of him is worth dissecting and exploring. At the same time, he serves as a much-needed anchor in her otherwise wide-ranging, fantastical inner world: he is always there for her, even when she doesn't think he is.

In the end, the book reads more like philosophical exploration of the nature of existence than it does like a narrative. It is not always obvious what is happening or what it all means, which provides food for thought and highlights the complexity of reality.

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EILEEN GONZALEZ (May 17, 2021)

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