

So Many People, Mariana

Maria Judite de Carvalho

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In the short stories of Maria Judite de Carvalho's collection *So Many People, Mariana*, people search in vain for contentment and belonging.

With all the human beings in the world, it should be impossible to ever feel isolated or misunderstood. And yet, the characters in these novellas and short stories never manage to find the human connections they long for. Some never even realize how dissatisfied they are until it is too late to do anything about it.

In "So Many People, Mariana," a woman is never able to overcome her bone-deep loneliness, despite her friends and lovers. The stories that follow are also tales of people who cannot see or are unable to take advantage of the opportunities that life gives them. Even on rare occasions when people do try to improve their lots, as in "Miss Arminda" or "Christmas Eve," inner demons or bad luck shut the door to their happiness after but a single, enticing glimpse. Wry, precise prose pries at each person's psyche, exposing fear, inertia, or single-mindedness—whatever keeps them from their goals.

Many of these stories explore issues of class and gender, with women often pressured to marry and have children—and feeling bereft, even desperate, when they cannot. In "The Shadow of the Tree," a sick man worries about how his disabled wife will fare after his impending death; it's a tragic display of how class affects destiny. But the entire collection is filled with examples of people who are unable to rise above the circumstances placed before them.

Melancholic, contemplative, and often heartbreaking, the short stories in *So Many People, Mariana* follow people who are trapped by life's misfortunes.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (September / October 2023)

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