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Pascal Garnier, Melanie Florence (Translator)

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Brice and Emma had bought their new home together.

Then Emma disappeared. Now, he awaits her return. He gradually comes to know his new neighbors, including Blanche, an enigmatic woman in white, who has lived alone since the death of her father, to whom Brice bears a curious resemblance . . .

Boxes Details

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From Reader Review Boxes for online ebook

Lisa says

This short novel has been on my reading list since a review in the Financial Times likened the author to Camus. It is fantastic as a study of grief and loss. It is an exploration of existentialism as a grieving man tries to redefine himself as a suddenly single man. The ending was too abrupt and bizarre to me but I will be playing this out in my mind for time to come. I've already ordered more of his novels. My only criticism is of the translation. I read foreign language novels to be immersed in culture but lament that I can't read in the original language. This is the first time I feel that I can comment on quality of the translation. I didn't like that it made me feel like the setting was England rather than France. The translator used very British slang such as "lad, how do I look then, on special offer, pheasant was done to a turn" rather than more neutral terms or even French terms. No doubt translation is difficult but it was too British to make it work.

Nicola Mansfield says

The cover of this book caught my eye and then when I saw the author being compared with Georges Simenon's psychologicals I just had to give it a try. I am a huge fan of Simenon's psychological novels (though not Maigret). Boxes is described as "noir" and in this case, that word means dark, cynical and depressing. It is comparable to Simenon but doesn't come close to his brilliance. I won't get into the plot as the book is a novella and we only know what is happening as it unravels with the plot. We do know at the beginning that Brice has moved into a new home he and his wife Emma bought, but Emma is missing. Why is eventually slowly revealed. Brice is not a stable person and he meets an equally unstable younger woman in the village to which he has moved. The atmosphere, the characters and the twists of plot are all morbidly bleak but I 'enjoy' unhappy books so that didn't displease me. In fact, I found some brilliant quotes that resonated with me. I do, however, feel that something may have been lost in the translation from the original French as there were some stilted sentences that just didn't flow naturally for me. The ending was abrupt and jarring to say the least. I understand it though I thought it could have been more eloquently written, perhaps it, again, was lost in translation. I am intrigued by the author however and would like to try him again.

Cleo Bannister says

From what I've gathered Pascal Garnier's book Boxes was published posthumously following his death in 2010, also little birds have indicated that this probably isn't the best example of his work, but I found plenty to enjoy, if enjoy is indeed the right word for such a grim and gloomy book.

Brice is moving to the country from the apartment he shared with his wife Emma in Lyon to the countryside, hence the title, all their lives are packed into labelled boxes ready for the removal men to arrive:

Perhaps it was an occupational hazard, but they were all reminiscent of a piece of furniture: the one called Jean-Jean, a Louis-Phillippe chest of drawers; Ludo, a Normandy wardrobe; and the tall, shifty looking one affectionately known as The Eel, a grandfather clock. This outfit of rascals with bulging muscles and smiles baring wolf-like teeth made short work of surveying the flat.

But despite the efficient way his life is hauled from Lyon to a small village there is something missing, Emma. At first Brice makes a stab at unpacking his boxes but not for long, he wants it to be right for Emma, his younger wife, a woman he isn't entirely sure he deserves.

But women's hearts are unfathomable and full of oddities as the bottom of their handbags.

And then we learn that she isn't just away, she's missing presumed dead in a terrorist attack in Egypt, while working as a journalist. Brice knows no-one in the small village although he gets adopted by a cat but his isolation from other humans aids his descent into depression, and worse, as he fails to accept the loss of his wife or to carry on with his illustration work for a children's book. Illustrating Mabel Hirsch's books about Sabine had been his bread and butter but Brice dislikes Mabel, Sabine and children.

The little brat, whose face he riddled with freckles for sport, was seriously taking over his life. As for her creator, he must have killed her at least a hundred times in the course of troubled dreams. He would throttle her until her big frogspawn eyes burst out of their sockets and then tear off all her jewellery. She could no longer move her poor arthritic fingers, they were so weighed down with gold and diamonds. Strings of pearls disappeared into the soft fleshy folds of her double chin. Old, ugly and nasty with it! All that emerged from her scar of a mouth, slathered in bloodred honey, were barbed compliments which would themselves around your neck, the better to jab you in the back.

With Emma's parents concern is spurned and it looks like Brice's life can't get any worse he meets Blanche, who is at best a little eccentric and constantly impresses on Brice how much he looks like her father who was also an artist. Let's just say the story becomes even more weird!

This is a short book, easily read with wonderful language, especially considering that it is a work of translation which evokes many feelings, most of which are, admittedly at the grimmer end of the scale. I am absolutely sure I will be seeking out more of Pascal Garnier's books as this evoked memories of the dark short stories written by the late Roald Dahl, that I loved in my teens.

I'd like to thank the publishers Gallic Books for my copy of this book in return for this honest review. Boxes was published in English in May 2015.

Marina Sofia says

The gradual build-up of strangeness and menace - nobody does it better than Garnier. Nor the descent of mind and body into depression or madness. And yet there was something about this story which didn't quite work for me: perhaps the figure of Blanche and her relationship with all the men in her life.

Ova - Excuse My Reading says

A bleak but beautifully written book. I wish I'd known French and could read Garnier without translation. Would definitely look to read more from him.

Leah says

Quirky and unsettling...

Brice Casadumont has packed his life in boxes to move from Lyon into the country. This wasn't his idea – he agreed to the move to please his wife, Emma. But now Emma is missing, though Brice keeps hoping each day that she will come back. It's only gradually that the reader finds out what's behind Emma's disappearance. So here he is, on his own, in an empty house with all his belongings in boxes in the garage and without the motivation to unpack, since he knows Emma will want to decide where everything should go when she comes back.

This novella-length story is the first thing of Pascal Garnier's that I've read. It's a compelling little portrait of a man in grief and denial, gradually sinking into the lethargy and apathy of depression, and coming close to the edge of insanity. But the bleakness is broken up by many touches of humour, which makes it an enjoyable read despite the subject matter. It's very well written and the translation, by Melanie Florence, is excellent.

Although all the characters are quirky, almost with a touch of the type of strange villagers in a standard horror story, Garnier makes them just about credible. Brice has deliberately isolated himself from his old friends and can't bring himself to get to work on the illustrations for a children's book that he was working on before Emma disappeared. Garnier lets us see just enough of his old life through occasional contacts with other people for us to know that he was probably always a bit of a difficult person, but also that his current behaviour is abnormal even for him. Although the book is in the third person, we only see the other characters as they appear to Brice, so they are deliberately vague, leaving the reader in the unsettling position of not quite knowing how much they are being distorted by his state of mind.

There's a mild feeling of horror about a lot of the descriptions of nature and the countryside too, as Garnier slips from lyricism to brutality and back in the course of single sentences.

Now and again, down from a bird ripped open by a fox in the night was caught by the breeze, rising and falling like snowflakes on the bushes.

It all adds to the off-kilter, disturbing feeling of the whole thing. And then, when it feels it might be getting a bit dark, Garnier will throw in a bit of perfectly timed observational humour...

A little further on, he passed a young mother holding the hand of a little four- or five-year-old girl who was crying and had a hand up to her forehead.

"That's the way it is, Laura. Some doors open by themselves and some don't."

Learning how the world works can be tough.

As Brice settles into his new home – well, into the garage of his new home – he makes friends with the rather strange Blanche, owner of the big house in the village, whose dead father he coincidentally resembles. Blanche has her own grief and denial thing going on, too, and for a while each seems to be good for the other. But Blanche's protective friend Élie is worried about their growing closeness, and as the story unfolds and the darkness grows, one feels he has good reason. Brice's only other friend is the stray cat who comes to

live with him, bringing a welcome touch of warmth and normality into his life (and making me dreadfully afraid that something truly horrible was going to happen to the cat...).

I loved about 95% of this and then it all became incredibly silly at the end. Fortunately, since the book is short, that wasn't enough to spoil my overall enjoyment, and I'm looking forward to reading more of Garnier's work in the near future. Especially since those in the know tell me this isn't one of his best...

NB This book was provided for review by the publisher, Gallic Books.

www.fictionfanblog.wordpress.com

Melinda says

The language is beautiful only complimented by the stellar translation. The momentum of darkness purposefully unfolds as Brice precipices on the brink of depression to madness. You're almost sucked into the darkness, the abyss of despair palpable. Intuition dismissed as Brice senses something isn't quite right with Blanche. Mixed feelings regarding Blanche's appearance, her confession came to quickly feeling untidy. No doubt her backstory was darker than I anticipated, nice touch to the overall plot and demented characterization. I enjoyed the suspense, however I felt the ending was abrupt, it left me wanting more. The journey was enjoyable more so than the destination, still well shaped.

Andy Weston says

"Your room is very quiet. It looks out on to the cemetery."

It was a clear night. The rows of little tombs were reminiscent of an outdoor cinema auditorium.

"This was my father's room. No one has slept here since. He didn't go far. He's over there behind the cypress."

For those who have never read Garnier this is a fairly typical passage. Filled with imagery, dark and yet a little humour, I find everything he writes to be extremely rewarding to read. He has gained popularity only quite recently in the UK. Though he died in 2010 fortunately there are still quite a few of his books awaiting translation. I have read them all. They are novella length, so why might you ask does this only gain 4 stars.

Boxes is about Brice, a twenty something year old grieving for the recent death of his wife. He refuses to believe she is dead and this affects his work and relationship with her family. A new relationship with a neighbour, Blanche, helps him to recover, but as ever with Garnier's books, all is not what it seems.

I have always thought Garnier's books could be longer. It's a great criticism for him, as he has left the reader wanting more. In this case though, I felt the story could even have been condensed. There is a period in the middle of the 120 pages where the story doesn't really go anywhere. It remains though, a thoroughly rewarding read.

Col says

Synopsis/blurb.....

Brice and Emma had bought their new home in the countryside together. And then Emma disappeared. Now, as he awaits her return, Brice busies himself with DIY and walks around the village. He gradually comes to know his new neighbours including Blanche, an enigmatic woman in white, who has lived on her own in the big house by the graveyard since the death of her father, to whom Brice bears a curious resemblance...

My take.....

Boxes was my third read from Pascal Garnier, after enjoying The Front Seat Passenger and The Islanders.

<http://col2910.blogspot.co.uk/2014/05...>

<http://col2910.blogspot.co.uk/2015/02...>

Brice has moved to the countryside. His wife Emma will be joining him shortly, or so we believe. In his new home and new surroundings, Brice becomes overcome by lethargy and starts a descent into depression and mental disintegration. Though when compared to Blanche – his new found village friend, he's the very picture of normality.

Things don't end well.

Along the way Garnier treats us to some gems....

Brice arrives for tea at Blanche's...

The tea was lukewarm and bitter, served in Duralex glasses, and the muffins that went with it were frankly disgusting.

“Do you like them? I baked them myself.”

“They’re delicious.”

Brice reminiscing bitterly over the inevitable Christmas gifts of his childhood.....

The Meccano set with its misleading picture on the lid, suggesting you could build a near life-sized model of London Bridge, contained barely enough pieces for a miserable three-wheeled cart. (He had calculated that he would need twenty boxes for London Bridge, he'd have been about twenty-five by the time he finished his opus.)

Towards the end.....

Stealing away like a thief had nothing glorious about it, but it took a certain amount of courage to resolve to be a coward.

Dark, black, bitter, funny and more than a little bit sad.

4 from 5

Pascal Garnier sadly died in 2010. Gallic Books have brought us seven of his novels so far with the promise

of more to come. Their website is here.

<http://belgraviabooks.com/gb>

Thanks to the publishers for my copy.

Read in August, 2015

<http://col2910.blogspot.co.uk/2015/08...>

Garry Pope says

Pascal Garnier's character study book *Boxes* (2012) is a window into dealing with loss.

Brice, a children's story illustrator, is packing because he and his wife Emma are moving from the city to a small French village: Saint-Joseph. Whilst waiting for Emma's return from abroad, things slip out of kilter for Brice in a way that only a Garnier book can.

With its short chapters and tight dialogue Garnier draws characters with emotions and problems.

Thematically, this reminded me of Iain Softley's 2001 film *K-PAX* from Gene Brewer's 1995 novel of the same name. Garnier, like Chuck Palahniuk, has the magician's ability to make the reader look one way, then hit them with the big reveal later on.

Although not as perfect as Garnier's magnificent novellas: *Moon in a Dead Eye* (2009) and *The Islanders* (2010), both shorter, funnier and better plotted, *Boxes* is still excellent, surpassing most books you'll read this year.

Kasa Cotugno says

Brice and his wife Emma, at her encouraging, have sold their city apartment and bought a house in the country. And this is not the romantic Provence-style France of imagination, but a suburbia that could just as well be in anywhere U.S.A. As Emma is not around, Brice is tasked with the job of performing the move. Dealing with the boxes. Boxes upon boxes. As with the only other Garnier book I've read so far, there is a smear of menace that hangs over the proceedings. Garnier has been called the most noir of contemporary writers in any language, and this is no exception. Brice is a loner, many of his inner musings are along the lines of "Children are Nazis. They recognize only one race: their own." So much exquisite writing here, with more than the usual black humor for noir: ("At his feet the spring babbled the mountain gossip...It was beautiful, and it was sad. It made you want to write a poem, or to shit. He opted for the second.")

I've only recently discovered Pascal Garnier, and have to space out his spare novels, almost novellas, so I don't run out soon since he died in 2010 and they are slowly being released in English editions. There are only 7 so far, with an 8th coming in June. I'd like to say I can't wait, but since the list is finite, will gladly wait.

Lynn says

Thank you Pascal you have restored my faith in consistently good authors.

Deborah says

[It is obvious

C.M. Crockford says

As weird and enigmatic a Garnier novel as can be. What makes his novels dynamic and sometimes frustrating (no one in this save for Elie exhibits standard human behavior) is how outsized and depraved the actors can be. No one is "normal" but maybe that's the point - even grieving widows are deranged.

Mary Lou says

I enjoy a descent into madness, and most of all when there is a concrete reason for it. In Boxes, Pascal Garnier provides a perfect blend of tangible and surreal. This comes close to my favourites.
