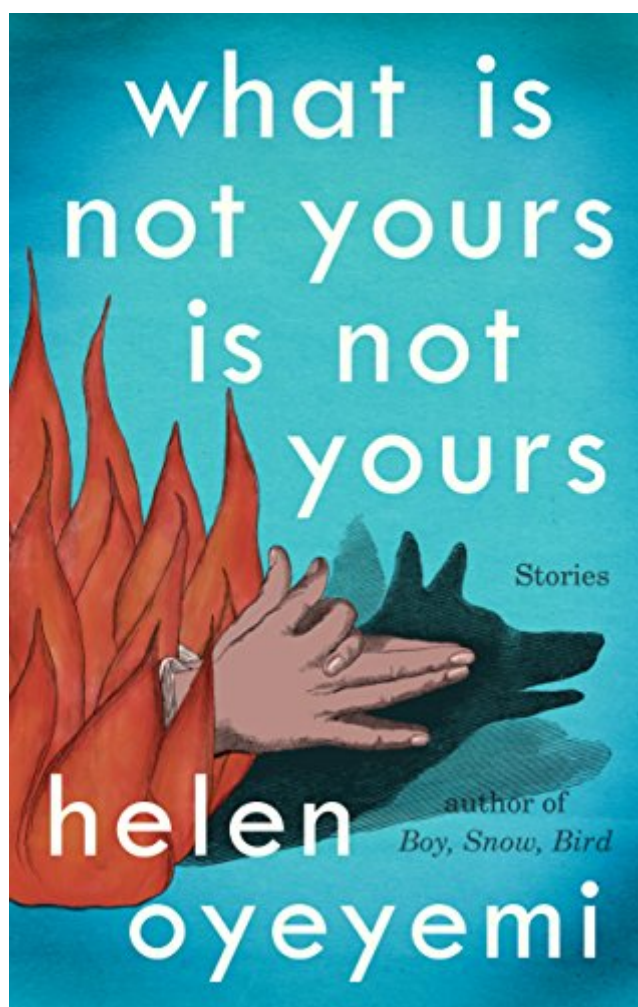


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What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours



Synopsis

A VULTURE (NEW YORK MAGAZINE) BEST BOOK OF 2016 SO FAR A TIME MAGAZINE BEST BOOK OF 2016 SO FAR ONE OF THE WASHINGTON POST'S 37 BOOKS WE'VE LOVED SO FAR IN 2016 ONE OF APPLE'S BEST BOOKS OF 2016 SO FAR "Transcendent." "The New York Times Book Review" Flawless. . . "Another masterpiece from an author who seems incapable of writing anything that's less than brilliant." "NPR From the award-winning author of Boy, Snow, Bird and Mr. Fox comes an enchanting collection of intertwined stories. "Playful, ambitious, and exquisitely imagined, What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours is cleverly built around the idea of keys, literal and metaphorical. The key to a house, the key to a heart, the key to a secret "Oyeyemi's keys not only unlock elements of her characters' lives, they promise further labyrinths on the other side. In "Books and Roses" one special key opens a library, a garden, and clues to at least two lovers' fates. In "Your Blood as Red as This?" an unlikely key opens the heart of a student at a puppeteering school. "Sorry" Doesn't Sweeten Her Tea" involves a "house of locks," where doors can be closed only with a key "with surprising, unobservable developments. And in "If a Book Is Locked There's Probably a Good Reason for That Don't You Think," a key keeps a mystical diary locked (for good reason). "Oyeyemi's tales span multiple times and landscapes as they tease boundaries between coexisting realities. Is a key a gate, a gift, or an invitation? What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours captivates as it explores the many possible answers. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Helen Oyeyemi has gained international acclaim for her earlier novels, including *MR. FOX and BOY*, *SNOW, BIRD*. Granta named the Nigerian-born writer one of the best young British novelists in 2013. Since her earliest writings, Oyeyemi has been inspired by a variety of folk and mythological sources, utilizing the language and imagery of classic folk and fairy tales in new and sometimes unsettling ways. Now, in her new story collection, *WHAT IS NOT YOURS IS NOT YOURS*, she continues to offer a strange but beautiful mix of contemporary characters and situations with classic folk and fairy tale motifs. It might be a bit of a stretch to call the nine stories that compose *WHAT IS NOT YOURS IS NOT YOURS* interconnected, although many do share moments of commonality, including some characters and imagery. Most notably, virtually all the stories contain imagery of locks and keys, which sometimes lie at the center of the plot but just as often serve a more metaphorical purpose. In the opening story, *Books and Roses*, a woman who was left at a monastery as a baby with a key to an unidentifiable door falls in love with another woman who has been left a key by a former lover, and both ladies must discover what doors their keys unlock --- and why. In *Drownings*, a man desperate to save a kingdom --- and a young woman --- from a tyrant throws a key into a fire, but his actions may destroy more lives than they save. And in *Sorry Doesn't Sweeten Her Tea*, a man takes care of a possibly hostile fish while its owner is overseas. The house is called *The House of Locks*, and the housesitter finds the house's properties unsettling: "Because of the doors. They don't stay closed unless they're locked."

Helen Oyeyemi may be one of the most imaginative writers working today so it is no surprise that her story collection astounds and amazes. Using the metaphorical (and often literal) conceit of keys, the stories tackle themes of discovery, connections, and belonging. The first story "my personal favorite" is entitled *Books and Roses* and reveals Ms. Oyeyemi at her finest. It begins (as do many in this collection) as a fable: "Once upon a time in Catalonia a baby was found in a chapel." As the story progresses, two women "both abandoned" share interwoven stories and a special key (and a book of roses) becomes integral to their fates. The story is masterfully

conceived. Other favorites are *Your Blood as Red as This?*, which centers on puppeteers and blurs the lines between the real and the surreal as characters grasp with sexual identity and confusion and the restoration of order. (The wooden devil suspected keys cause more problems than they solve, so she followed Myrna with one plan in mind, to do her bit to restore order). In *Sorry Doesn't Sweeten Her Tea*, two young teens are confronted with disillusionment when their musical idol abuses a down-and-out prostitute and take a fabalistic revenge. And, in *Presence*, the student puppeteer's compatriots, Radha (a bereavement counselor) and Myrna, are now married and conduct an unusual experiment: isolation in their apartment, which always registers the time as twelve thirty, to reach acceptance of losing the son they never had. Stories like these are merged with modern-day fairy tales – *Drownings*, a fire-and-water fable complete with an evil tyrant, and *Dornicka and the St. Martin's Day Goose*, which are a bit less compelling.

So here's the honest truth. When I read Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* two years ago, I didn't like it AT ALL. I read it before I had started this blog, and have to say I was quite harsh in my Goodreads review. Now, after having read more literary fiction and developing a taste for the more off-beat and weird scope of lit fic, I think I would actually enjoy it these days. There's absolutely no doubt Oyeyemi can write therefore, despite my less than stellar experience, I was still inspired to pick up her latest short story collection. Needless to say, I was not disappointed. Just goes to show, giving second chances is not only a nice thing to do, but makes for some great reading. *What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours* checked all the boxes for me in regards to what I most appreciate in a short story collection, including: a bit of oddness throughout, and some connecting vein linking the stories together in a cohesive manner. Plus, like I mentioned above, just damn good prose is always a positive. Each story, in some way, involved locked doors, keys, and secrets, but utilized and abstracted that concept in many different ways, therefore it always felt fresh and inventive. Every story left me with more questions than answers, but in that satisfying and thought-provoking kind of way, versus a frustrating and awkward kind of way. Of course, there always seems to be at least one dud in every short story collection, and for me this was the one about puppets. I'm not sure if I just don't get it, or maybe I'm just scared of puppets, but it felt long and a bit tedious to me as I was reading it. Another pseudo-negative, but sort of my own fault too, was the sheer number of characters.

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