

Reis's Pieces: Love, Loss, and Schizophrenia

by Karen Winters Schwartz; Norwood, New Jersey,
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This is the second novel by Karen Winters Schwartz, an active member of the National Alliance on Mental Illness and a long-time advocate for mental health awareness. In it she tells the story of a man whose life is altered by the late onset of psychotic illness. As the subtitle implies, it recounts the losses that preceded it and those that resulted from it and, yes, an unlikely love story.

Reis Welling is a somewhat precocious professor of botany at Cornell University. He has always been a lover of nature and absorbed by his studies, which have allowed him to advance rapidly in the academic world but have also kept him from developing a very broad social life. Through one of his colleagues, he is introduced to and subsequently falls in love with a less brilliant, but more extroverted

young woman on the faculty of another department, who shares his love of nature and hiking. So things are looking pretty good for him until he begins to experience psychotic symptoms, which are worsened by the unexpected death of his father, with whom Reis was quite close. Reis' fiancé does not understand his grief and is unable to endure his changes and begins to separate from him.

Following a suicide attempt, Reis is hospitalized, stabilized, and returned to his hometown community, where he struggles to find a new life. He takes a low-level job in a local library and reluctantly ingests the pills his psychiatrist urges upon him. He feels alienated and observes the community clandestinely, often perching in one of the trees of the public park. One day he startles a young woman and her dog when she encounters him in such a position and has a brief, awkward conversation with her before they part. Although this woman is nearly engaged

to a man who is successful and handsome, if somewhat preoccupied with himself, she becomes slightly obsessed with Reis and seeks him out at the library where he works. Thus begins a relationship that endures despite various tribulations faced over the next year and for which she abandons her previous partner. Notwithstanding periods of symptomatic relapse, self-doubt, self-punishment, and suicidal obsessions, the book ends happily.

Critics may find fault with the authenticity and plausibility of certain aspects of the plot and the characters, as well as the portrayal of the illness with which Reis is afflicted and the psychiatrist who treats him. They would probably be justified in doing so, but admirers of the book would counter that the author's underlying objective is a consideration of the stigma, both internal and external, that accompanies psychotic illness and the portrayal of one man who learns to overcome it and reestablish a satisfying and full life. The author portrays the hope of redemption despite overwhelming challenges. Some psychiatrists will enjoy this book, and persons affected by mental illnesses and their family members will likely appreciate it more.

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