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Review: Semiotic Love

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Book Reviewed:[Semiotic Love \[Stories\]](#)**Brian Phillip Whalen****Awst Press, 2021****128 pages****9780997193893**SEMIOtic LOVE
[STORIES]

BRIAN PHILLIP WHALEN

Semiotic Love, published by Austin's Awst Press, is a collection of flash and micro fiction that ranges over a wide variety of human relationships — specifically, love in its myriad forms.

The recurrent theme, at least among the larger pieces, seems to be that of communication within these relationships. The middle section of the book, which gives the collection its name, is the most prolonged and the most “scientific” of these analyses, drawing on the Greimas Square of semiotics which illuminates the relationships between opposing concepts — here, male-female — and charts the unraveling of a relationship.¹

One could, if one was so inclined, draw this same semiotics square over the collection itself, with the short pieces titled ‘Men’ and ‘Women’, falling in the first and third sections, respectively. Here lives are sketched in miniature, in opposition to each other, the women viewed only through their relationship to an unnamed man.

There are small, regular intervals where the reader is presented with telegraphed phrases and anecdotes perhaps slightly reminiscent of Gertrude Stein. For instance, there is related in a single sentence that ‘Popa’ came to be when he misspelled ‘Poppa’ on a Christmas card. And while they are occasionally amusing or pithy, and do fit the theme of communications and miscommunications, they do not, on the whole, provide any great depth to the larger explorations.

The micro fictions fall somewhere in between these little gathered phrases and incidents and the longer pieces in the collection. Parents are lost to disease and the

inexorable march of time onwards, a visiting writer bends physical balance into a mental/spiritual balance and a promise to never kill an animal is not really one.

Where this collection does take off is in its longer stories and more sustained inquiries into love and loss. “Una Vida Mejor” is a deft exploration of the relationship between brother and sister, as is “Broadcast” which closes with a sad and stunning image of a promised land.

The real standout of this collection is also its longest. “Brothers” is a study in absence with its supposed celebration of a marital union in Prague undercut with missed moments, missing words and, finally, hauntingly, missing brothers.

(Note from the Editorial Collective: *Semiotic Love* was provided free for review.)

Brian Phillip Whalen’s work can be found in *The Southern Review*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Copper Nickel*, Poets.org, the *Flash Nonfiction Food* anthology, *The Southern Poetry Anthology: Virginia, and elsewhere*. Brian holds a Ph.D. from the *State University of New York at Albany* and is the recipient of a *Vermont Studio Center* residency. He lives with his wife and daughter in *Tuscaloosa*, where he teaches creative and first-year writing at *The University of Alabama*.

Awst Press is an independent literary publisher in *Austin, Texas*, featuring impressive work from diverse voices.

Ash Lange is *San Antonio Review’s Prose Editor*.

Footnotes

1. Further information about the Greimas Square and Semiotics in general, may be found here : <http://www.signosemio.com/greimas/semiotic-square.asp> –