

A curious, chilly excursion into the mind of an obsessive

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FICTION:

Envy, By Alain Elkann, translated by Alastair McEwen, Pushkin Press, 125pp, pound(s)7.99

WHAT A curious little book; what an interestingly chilly excursion into how the human mind works. Here is an elegantly European study of our need to know, ponder, fret, pursue and obsess, writes Eileen Battersby

Envy, originally published in Italy in 2006, comes in English translation, beautifully, stylishly packaged and grasps the reader with the allure of its measured, reasonable tone. Why? Who knows? This is at once a simple book as well as a dauntingly sophisticated one. The narrator is a writer who appears to spend an inordinate amount of time travelling and socialising and pondering his current obsession, without ever writing.

Although the book appears to take envy as its theme, it is really about the way idle interest becomes intense, all-absorbing and, ultimately, obsessive. And through the obsessing comes a resolution of astonishing clarity. It is a psychological quest that races around in circles, exactly as thoughts tend to in minds that are restless.

The narrator, Giacomo Longhi, describes how he became interested in the personality of a famous artist called Julian Sax. It all began with a chance observation. Longhi recalls when he first saw the artist, sharing a meal with another man in a Brompton Road restaurant: "I noticed how the two men seemed satisfied to be in each other's company." The narrator admits to not knowing why the image stayed in his mind. But it doesn't matter, it is sufficiently interesting to attract - and sustain a narrative that is both precise and convincingly conversational. Elkann evokes a narrative mood in which one individual actively attempts to explain, to himself, why his thoughts have begun to run in a specific direction. It is as if that first sighting of Sax began a sequence of sensations that tell the narrator far more about himself and his emotional responses, than it does about Sax - although we also learn something of Sax as pieces of information gather courtesy of random remarks supplied by others, including the narrator's grown daughter who has an interesting name, Sole - even the smallest detail in this novel tends to be interesting.

The image of Sax at supper appears to have initially slipped to the back of the narrator's mind. Some time later, when he is having a meal in Madrid with two men - one is an art critic, the other is a man influential in the arts world - who are discussing a forthcoming art event, Sax enters the conversation: ". . . I don't exactly remember why, the conversation moved on

to Julian Sax. They talked about him enthusiastically; both of them thought he was the greatest living artist and felt that it would be only right to organise an exhibition of Sax's work in Venice as soon as possible . . .". Their shared interest begins to excite the narrator, he is intrigued. Then a series of coincidences worthy of a Paul Auster novel begin. Back in Rome he is visited by an English friend who has married a younger woman and who has had a son. The wife turns out to be the daughter of Julian Sax. This little piece of information causes the narrator to mention that he would like to interview Sax, but the son-in-law seems to feel an interview is unlikely.

Such difficulties make the project all the more compelling. Elkann's lightness of touch, and the subtle wit of it all, sustain a story in which very little actually happens. The narrative develops through chance details. With each new piece of information, Longhi assumes a new role, that of amateur detective, and begins piecing together the character of Sax. The artist emerges as a nasty individual with a reputation for falling in love with his female models, then dumping them as he moves on to his next passionate affair. During his pursuit of Sax, the narrator also finds himself not only encountering a large number of characters, but assessing them. There may be little action, but there is a great deal of talk.

And of course the more we find out about Sax through the narrator's research, the more we discover about him. He is a writer who feeds upon his own insecurities; for a while it seems that the only dynamic sustaining him through his daily routine is the quest for Sax.

A clue appears when he is told that Sax frequents a tea shop in Notting Hill. Once back in London, the narrator makes for the tea shop, only to miss Sax by minutes. The chase continues as the narrator somehow - this is not explained - summons up the nerve to ask for direction to the artist's house. Having found the house, he then pauses at the audacity of his actions: "I felt intimidated at having attained my goal." Well, he gets over it and knocks at the door. All he manages to secure from the young male assistant is the telephone number of Sax's lawyer, who appears also to act as an agent. It is an early point in the novel, yet Elkann has already succeeded in establishing his narrator as a credible human prey to a level of curiosity that grows by the second. Before long, he has involved his daughter. A meeting is arranged - at Tony's tea shop, which quickly becomes very important and the scene of several vivid set pieces.

On a Saturday morning, the narrator, his daughter and Rosa, his beautiful second wife, arrive at the tea shop. Sax is there, with his daughter, a grandchild and a son-in-law. The narrator and the two women proceed to stare at the artist. Sax, obviously irritated, leaves. "He felt he was being watched . . . Our silence and our inquisitive stares had disturbed their family get-together."

Perhaps it shouldn't be funny, but it is. The narrator begins to fear that Sax might paint Rosa and destroy her. On another visit to Tony's tea shop, the

narrator arrives as an abrasive Sax is being interviewed by a journalist. More details. More travel. More conversations.

There are flashes of Nabokov, and Calvino. It is absurd yet plausible, such is the consistency of the narrative voice and tone of polite exasperation well rendered by translator Alastair McEwen. Sax sightings dominate the narrator's life and his exchanges within his circle. Finally, as an interview is proving impossible, he decides to write a novel in which an elegant killer is engaged to murder the artist, for which the narrator plans a surprise ending. The human mind is a strange place, as strange as this fast-moving, witty and enjoyable clever little salon piece.

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