

**A Review of David Orsini's *Bitterness / Seven Stories*  
By Ben W. McClelland, University of Mississippi**

David Orsini's collection of short fiction, *Bitterness / Seven Stories*, is an auspicious literary artist's debut. The book presents credible, complex characters and displays a fluent literary style that features richly embroidered sentences, situating the reader in an early twentieth-century world of diverse geographic and social scenes that are rendered with uncanny authenticity. Throughout the stories there resonates a rich framework of philosophical probing, mystical appreciation, psychological analysis, and untrammelled sexual exploration. Indeed, the complex artistic achievement of this collection defies easy analytical formulation. I will point to salient aspects of the work to demonstrate that the book will reward appreciative, discriminating readers.

The principal characters of the stories in David Orsini's *Bitterness / Seven Stories* are often paragons. They are privileged or gifted individuals who possess or who develop a keenness of expertise in life's arts, in profession, in physical prowess, and/or in intellect. After demonstrating (even celebrating) a character's extraordinary skill, Orsini plunges the character suddenly into calamity, causing her to deal with irretrievable loss, usually the (often sudden and violent) death of a loved one, as with the widow in "Memorials," or with his own impending death, as with Adam Mackenzie in "Affinities." The arc of character development in the stories traces the individual's actions subsequent to this loss. In ongoing action and in flashbacks, Orsini shows the mettle of these people. They are extraordinary in one way or another. They exhibit exceptional physical beauty, harmony with Nature, intelligence, and emotional power as well as emotional vulnerability. In his conception of character Orsini has crafted credible, if exceptional, individuals. He presents the reader with subtle delineations of the human psyche, brilliant explorations of the mind's reach, unparalleled perception of the sensuous world, and thought-provoking sexuality.

As Orsini's characters proceed through a developmental arc that includes robust energy for and success at life and love, tragic loss, and a continuing existence fated by individual temperament and circumstances, they exhibit various human responses. The broad range of complex characters, mostly people of an educated and/or privileged class, stride across an array of scenes from Europe and New England. This is no breezy romp through a superficially sketched world of simple people. Orsini skillfully and thoroughly plumbs the depths of human character. So, too, Orsini's depiction of the world is as deep as it is wide. Indeed, a signal pleasure for the reader is savoring Orsini's astounding, encyclopedic rendering of the world before and during the Great Wars of the last century. He reveals a surprising depth of expertise in fish and fishing, horse breeds and horseback riding, lighthouse keeping, farming, landscape architecture, structural architecture, antique furnishings, interior decorating, educational programs, and the lifestyles of a variety of individuals.

Consider this example of precise detail, which is representative of numerous others, in Orsini's description of a piece of farmhouse furniture: "He noticed, too, as a way of holding his tension still, the first-rate reproduction of a Louis XV *vaisselier*. The two-piece hutch offered a three-shelf plate rack atop a service and storage buffet that held a cutlery drawer and one-shelf cabinet. So many hours the diligent artisan must have given to the solid mahogany wood with natural cherry veneers and to the hand-carved details: the elaborate molding, the scalloped apron with rosette, the snail legs and antiqued solid brass hardware, and mortised lock and key." Orsini excels at spatial description (indoors and out), using sensory details (authentic to period and place) to situate the reader vicariously with the characters in opulent houses, in verdant gardens, in well-tended farmlands, and on windswept bay waters. This mass of details adds up to more than the sum of its parts. With it Orsini evinces a palpable quality of *mis-en-scène* that is rare in print media.

Moreover, Orsini employs the style and themes from art and literature as metaphors for characterization and as themes for story. Uniquely, Orsini draws character into synergistic symmetry with the power of a classic work of art or with the physical prowess of a natural process or form. In "Aftermath," Olivier engages in a mutually tolerant, symbiotic relationship with a personified earth: "We learn how to be friends and to forgive one another." Olivier's example of forgive-and-forget flexibility runs counter to his daughter's refusal to grant such charity to Paul, who is implicated in her husband's death and who is crushed by her obdurateness.

Another example, more nuanced and complex, comes in "Ménage à Trois" with Eleanor's affection for the love expressed in Shakespeare's one-hundred-sixth sonnet, coupled with her special insight into Nature's predatory life. The sonnet's analogy of "a mystic equation of human-divine" love fascinates Eleanor. When Eleanor speaks of it, her mentors, Charlotte and Alain, observe a metaphysical quality of romance and charm within her: "Then they'd observed the oblique light gently express her. A softer radiance (as if rising from within) belonged to her alone." Orsini links Eleanor's Orphic quality directly to her observations—for instance, during a visit to "exotic Camargue, a landscape of shimmering lakes and sand-dunes and reed beds." Eleanor is intrigued by "graceful and dexterous" flamingos, "wily heron[s]," and other water birds. In their physical beauty and rapacious feeding, Eleanor sees the beauty and dark mystery of life: "How clearly Nature revealed to her eyes that day its casual betrayals. She recognized in its splendor a darker intimation about the danger within its beauty—an intimation which her keen mind and the early promptings of her intuition had already taught her." In pairing these two qualities (of intellect and intuition), Orsini reveals Eleanor as not only precocious, but also prescient, foretelling her *ménage* with mentors, "her Spirit-driven earth-mates... full-bodied sensualities."

Elsewhere Orsini employs this artistic device of a character's synergy and symmetry with other power to good effect as well. For example, in "Memorials" the guidance mechanism of the lighthouse (the "grand Fresnel lens") affords the lost, grieving widow a tool for personal orientation: "How good it was to be reminded in this moment of the guardian beacon within herself which could light her way past the obstacles confronting

her. Surely, through her own powers—through the light that was her herself active in mind, body, and spirit—she would gradually secure her rescue.” In the title story, “Bitterness,” Claudette finds, in “the searching lens of a Leica...her camera’s eye—which reflected her own tough spirit.” Julie, too, wields the camera knowingly. In the photo sessions, “Claudette and Julie Serrault discovered a measure of truth in their awareness of other people.”

As another aspect of his literary style, Orsini crafts rhythmic and richly embroidered sentences. When one reads this syntax—which features parenthetical insertions and plentiful modifiers—one calls to mind Faulknerian and Jamesean styles. Judiciously, after Orsini designs a complex sentence formation (with informative and suspenseful interrupters and modifiers), he often follows with a succinct, emphatic simple expression. Consider just a sampling of a syntactical structure that is standard fare throughout the stories.

“When he died, the bright colors of the earth, to Henrik’s and Ingrid’s eyes, instantly faded. Then, a mere six months later, Ingrid—racked by debilitating grief and the onset of severe arthritis—also died. A massive stroke overwhelmed her uneasy frailty.”

“Shrouding her feelings in silence and in a cold courtesy, she at first made no reply. Her face, burnished by her hours of labor under a summer’s heated sky and under the warm touch of early October winds, wore its own mask of modulated despair. She was wondering (he could tell) why she’d allowed him to come, now that her seeing him, alive and intact, had answered her curiosity. No, she did not want to go on with any of this.”

“But it was in this present period, just after retiring from her academic obligations at Bryn Mawr, that Amelia (her belated searching glance no longer giving to her earlier responses the tincture of the inevitable) questioned with probing objectivity why, in spite of her unrequited ardency for Brian, she herself had not gone forward to marry a man who could love her in the erotic way that most men love women.”

“Yet now, looking back (pensive before the austere past that illumined her celibacy), she willingly admitted the truth which with her romantic yearnings and with her latent fear she had suppressed. In this one mysterious aspect of her life, she had not been brave.”

Not only does Orsini’s carefully segmented architectonics satisfy in meting out meaning, but also in cadencing tempo, as one might find in fine poetic expression.

The theme of *Bitterness / Seven Stories* is often just that: an emotional imbalance, triggered by personal loss and characterized by anger and resentment. Only rarely is this harsh reality relieved and even then the moment is tinged with bitter-sweetness. In “Bitterness” even though the wife eventually heals sufficiently from the loss of her daughters to want to adopt two orphan girls, her husband is unable to risk love again for fear of its loss once more:

“No,” he said. “There’s too much risk in it.”

“What risk could there possibly be?”  
“The world,” he said. “Everything.”

Thus, both of them will continue to suffer from loss, each in his and her different way.

In “A More Than Ordinary Life,” Amelia lives to an old age unmarried, having had more than an ordinary share of losses, from physical infirmity to loss of love through betrayal, and a failure of nerve. In a tragic automobile accident, Paul (“Aftermath”) suffers serious injuries and the loss of his friend. After a difficult recovery, plagued by guilt, he confronts his friend’s widow, hoping to help her and her family with a grant of funds. However, she refuses the offer and refuses to forgive him—a two-fold rejection which leads him to a ruinous alcoholic life wherein his wife suffers, as well.

Each story can stand alone, complete and fulfilling. However, given the subtle connections between families, eras, locales, and themes, all of them together exhibit an astonishing reach of thought and language, with complex and interconnected levels of meaning. The whole being more than the sum of the parts, *Bitterness/ Seven Stories* adds up to a highly satisfying literary experience for the contemporary reader.

I unreservedly recommend it.

---

Ben W. McClelland is Professor of English and Holder of the Schillig Chair in Composition within the English Department of the University of Mississippi. His publications include *Soldier’s Son* (The University Press of Mississippi), *The New American Rhetoric* (Harper Collins), and *Writing Practice: A Rhetoric of the Writing Process* (Longman).