

The Sensualist

By Barbara Hodgson

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
Helen Martin, an art historian who's particularly taken with medical illustrations, has left the New World in search of her mysteriously absent husband, Martin Evans. The two have been apart many times before (he's a journalist after all), but this time no one, not even his mother, knows where he has gone. The novel begins with the feverish Helen snaking by train across Europe on the way to Martin's last known location, Vienna. Along the way, she becomes entangled in a plot involving a murder in an anatomical art museum.

This sounds, at first glance, like the premise of a run-of-the-mill missing-persons detective story. But Barbara Hodgson embellishes this simple tale with a baroque narrative style that suggests a symbolic order to Helen's anxious search. The mystery entwines with Helen's metaphysical and emotional quest for solace after the death of her relationship. Helen becomes obsessed with bodies--her own and those of her fellow travelers: "Helen woke up wearing someone else's eyes. Eyes that shattered her orbs into a thousand piercing splinters, that shook her balance off its pivot and flung her headlong into a mercurial fog." In several similar waking scenes, Helen imagines her breasts swelling and shrinking or her body parts mingling with others' as they look on. Throughout the book, she sees and feels and tastes and touches with fine-grained detail, and her bizarre body consciousness moves so easily from a dreamlike fantasy back into the prose of the mystery narrative that a dogmatic reader is apt to become frustrated if he or she demands a dogged pursuit of clues and solutions. But straightforward mystery is not Hodgson's method. The intersubjectivity of her characters is drawn in a poetic language that, like the exquisite and macabre color illustrations interlaced with the text, are meant to estrange sensory experiences and evoke consciousness of embodied existence. Hodgson's first book, *The Tattooed Map* (1995), was a similarly rich book of illustrations and intelligent prose, but *The Sensualist* is a more robust novel, a sophisticated artistic achievement that represents a significant literary talent. --*Patrick O'Kelley*

Review
'The Sensualist' is handsomely packaged in antiques anatomical drawings, cut-outs and fold-aways. These are both dcor and clues, as the heroine tracks down some missing woodblocks from the 16th century and, co-incidentally, her own missing husband. Helen Martin, the heroine, is an updated Alice in Wonderland almost as odd as Lewis Carroll's. She meets peculiar characters on trains-outrageous old women, a talking dog, a suicidal passport inspector...Not only can the author package a books, she writes with a wicked sense of humor. For one of the more eccentric books you can find on a shelf, this may be it. -- *Sante Fe New Mexican*

Riding on a train to Vienna in search of her runaway husband, a Canadian art historian named Helen Martin enters a twilight world of strange hallucinations, astounding coincidences and deadly conundrums. Awakening in the middle of the night, Helen finds herself sharing a compartment with an old woman named Rosa Kovslovsky, who is somehow linked to her-so closely linked that Anna starts to believe her own body parts are being replaced by Rosa's. Then this odd companion hands her a small box full of wonders and clues, which will accompany Helen on a tour of Europe in search of much more than her missing spouse. The box contains a book on human anatomy, Jewels and notes. And, in a nice twist, the design of Barbara Hodgson's novel THE SENSUALIST incorporates all these visual aids. As readers follow Helen, we see the same images she is seeing: Illustrated plates from ancient anatomy texts, medicine vials, a pearl-studded picture frame. Like the historical works she researches, Helen's box-and Hodgson's book-provides a way of interweaving 'the significance of the words with the importance of the pictures.' Helen soon finds herself embroiled in a historical mystery as printing blocks from the works of the anatomist Vesalius seem to have resurfaced long after they were reportedly destroyed in World War II. Helen's husband was on their trail, and

she quickly resumes his quest. 'The Sensualist' is a quirky and intense novel, full of weird events and oddball characters (a man who is interviewing every person in the Vienna telephone directory; a doctor who is inspired to become a train conductor when the conductor on his own train drops dead) built around an investigation of the senses. The best part is Hodgson's combination of pictures and text: as a physical object, 'The Sensualist' becomes an integral part of the plot, guiding the reader as the complex narrative unravels. -- *The New York Times*

The best part is Hodgson's combination of pictures and text: as a physical object, *The Sensualist* becomes an integral part of the plot, guiding the reader as the complex narrative unravels. -- *The New York Times Book Review*, Erik Burns

About the Author
Barbara Hodgson is a Vancouver-based writer, photographer, and designer. Her illustrated novels include The Tattooed Map, The Sensualist, and Hippolyte's Island.

Users Review

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Micheal Clothier:

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