



The Figures of Beauty

David MacFarlane

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Moving from Paris to Italy to North America, a sensuous, heartbreaking novel about art, beauty, star-crossed lovers, and the choices that define our lives, from the award winning author of Summer Gone

A young man arrives in Paris in 1968, where a series of unlikely events lead him to a tiny village in Italy—and to the great love of his life. A marble merchant meets a couple on their honeymoon, introducing them to the sensual beauty of Carrara. An Italian woman travels to Canada on an odyssey to find the father she never knew. A terrible accident in a marble quarry changes the course of a young boy's life and, ultimately, sets in motion each of these stories, which David Macfarlane masterfully chisels into a magnificent whole.

Oliver Hughson falls in love with wild, bohemian Anna over the course of one glorious summer in Italy. Bound by a sense of responsibility to his adoptive parents, he leaves her and returns home—an act he will regret for the rest of his life. Through luck or fate, Oliver had found the woman with whom he was meant to be. And now he must try to find his way back to her.

Narrated by the daughter Oliver never knew he had, *The Figures of Beauty* is a love story of mythic proportions that reminds us of the powerful bond that can connect two people indelibly across oceans and time.

The Figures of Beauty Details

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Author : David MacFarlane

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From Reader Review The Figures of Beauty for online ebook

Steven Buechler says

It is amazing how a certain region can have a hold over things which originate from that area. A unique product of an area can create impressions with people who live thousands of miles away and they may not even be aware of it. And it is that concept that David Macfarlane explores in his wonderfully complex novel *The Figures of Beauty*.

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It was unusual to see tourists. Carrara was off the beaten track. A correspondent for an English travel journal had recently complained: "Thanks to a surfeit of marble, there is not the shadow of anything that can be called 'society' in Carrara." This, so far as Julian Morrow was concerned, was not a bad thing.

The plot deals with a series of people that have some sort of connection to this region of Italy known for its marble. A young man travels there in 1968 after fleeing the riots of Paris and meets the love of his life. A Welsh marble merchant meets a Canadian couple on honeymoon there and shows them the beauty of the region. A woman from the area travels to Canada to meet the father she never knew. A young boy working in the quarries witnesses a terrible accident and his life changes in unexpected ways. And the infamous artist Michelangelo makes a cameo to explore the area. Macfarlane brilliantly weaves these stories together to talk about the influence of the region.

[Link to my complete review](#)

Jojo says

I could not keep any of these characters/timelines straight and none of them had compelling enough stories to make me care. I still can not tell you what the point of this novel was.

Cyndy Aleo says

Somewhere in here is a beautiful book about marble and sculpture in Italy. There are many highlightable quotes and turns of phrase so perfect that readers will feel themselves exactly in the moment with the characters. Unfortunately, the plotlines are multiple and stretch over a period of over 500 years, and the multitude of characters and rapidly switching plotlines will leave readers adrift, unable to connect to any of them. By the final reveal, readers may be more invested with the process of sculpture than what actually ties the characters together.

Summary: A woman hoping to learn about the father she's never known sets out to discover what happened between him and her mother during the Canadian man's four-month stop in the Carrara area of Tuscany, where most great marble is found. Through alternating plot lines, the readers are taken through a butterfly-effect-like timeline in which each small instance leads to the final culmination in which all the plotlines intersect.

Terri says

Review also found at <http://kristineandterri.blogspot.ca/2...>

I received an advanced copy of this book from the publisher Harper via Edelweiss in exchange for an honest review. The expected publication date is October 7, 2014.

I have so many thoughts running through my head that I am sure I will not be able to express them how I want but alas I will try.

While this story is truly about what it advertises I feel that a huge part of it is missing in the synopsis provided. While it is essentially a love story it is also about art. Overwhelming about art to the point of being distracting. As someone who has an appreciation for art but not necessarily a deep love of it I have to admit I found it annoying.

I was reading this on my kindle and by the time I reached the 30% mark I announced that if there was another mention of Michelangelo I would scream. By the 40% mark I was ready to throw the book and myself out of the window. The same goes for Carrara marble. I compare it to when the religious groups come knocking on your door to sell you the virtues of joining their belief system. While I believe I do not appreciate others forcing their belief systems on me. This may be harsh however this is how I felt. I also found the book to be overly descriptive of everything to the point that I found my mind drifting while reading. While beautiful words and passages can lift a book to another level I feel there is a fine line and that they can also distract from the true story.

Lastly I found that the way the book traversed between the multiple stories confusing. While I love when there are multiple story-lines that weave together I found that the transitions did not necessarily work. I often found myself re-reading passages to I could be clear which story I was reading and who was narrating it.

While I am being very critical of this book I will pause to say that underneath there really is a beautiful story. I just felt that it was buried so deep below the rest that it was difficult to get to. While I necessarily didn't enjoy this read I can see how others will. Lovers of art (real lovers) will enjoy it. Those who enjoy great writing before plot. This is one of those stories that I feel will do great to a specific market niche and not necessarily to the masses. I am rating it a 3 star on that merit.

Denise says

Full disclosure: I was chosen a First Reads winner, and received an ARC of *The Figures of Beauty* by David MacFarlane in the mail. That in no way influenced the review that follows.

Where to start?! I wonder if David MacFarlane asked himself that question when telling this tale. Its several stories actually span more than 80 years and even include other time periods in order to describe the sculpted works of Michelangelo, Brancusi, and Canova. There are also several mentions of and quotes from Charles Dickens, who evidently spent some time in the area of Italy where much of the novel is set. The stories (ultimately connected by MacFarlane) chiefly take place in 2009-2013, 1922, 1944, and 1968- early 1970s.

The novel is divided into a prelude, five parts, and an epilogue. Cleverly, each of the five parts is titled in reference to something connected to sculpting (various tools and smoothing materials) and each is also accompanied by a sculpture quote, both of which (by that, I mean the tools and the quotes) provide clues to the sequence of the five parts. Four of the five parts also contain excerpts from a long letter written in 2010 by the 1968 and present-day protagonist (Oliver Hughson) to his daughter. Within each part, there are stories from each of the four main time frames. The stories do progress but, honestly, it's a challenge to keep all of them and their respective characters in mind. In an effort to force myself to complete the book, I finally resorted to making a chart.

Obviously, I am not the author, but my preference would have been for the story to skip between the time frames at least a little less often. There are 39 chapters, four letter excerpts, a prologue, and an epilogue -- which makes a total of 45 different time frame jumps -- plus a few additional historical digressions along the way. In no case does one chapter lead directly into another but, rather, in all cases, each new chapter skips to one of the alternate time frames. There are many repetitious tellings and even a few retellings of certain episodes (usually by alternate narrators), a technique which, while it does prevent the reader from connecting events before the author wants to reveal a bit more of the story, I ultimately found disconcerting. I am of the opinion that some things in the novel work and some things don't: starting in the present day works; including the letter excerpts at the start of all but one of the five parts works; and, to me, the time frame sequences don't work very well. I would have preferred to either read the back-story as a series of several past-to-present or present-to-past episodes, rather than in the confusing order in which the novel presents them.

The ARC copy, on its back cover, indicates that Oliver Hughson's daughter narrates *The Figures of Beauty*. That might be considered somewhat true for the portions of the story by which time she was alive and possibly even for the historical sculpture stories, but definitely didn't apply to the narration of the 1922 and 1944 eras. I was pleased to see that that particular description printed on the ARC has been replaced for the hardbound copy by excerpts from several early reviews.

What I liked most: the believable characters and well-connected settings, and their beautifully-written descriptions. These I give four stars.

What I liked least: the ever-changing time frames, and the ending. These I reluctantly give two stars.

Average: three stars.

Melissa says

At the core of this novel is the area of Carrara, Italy which is famous for its marble quarries. All of the characters in this novel are in some way tied to this region in Tuscany. The book begins with the story of a woman who has grown up knowing only who her mother is and every time she tries to ask about her father she is given a vague answer. Her mother, whose name is Anna, has lived in the Carrarra region all of her life and is an eccentric sculptor. The story then jumps to Oliver, a Canadian man who is an art critic for a Canadian newspaper. It turns out that Oliver spent four months in Carrarra and was Anna's lover and thus the long-lost father of her child. The story also narrates the lives of several other characters, including the quarry owner, the quarry workers, and Oliver's parents to name a few. Intertwined throughout all of the character development is a history of sculpture and art. Michelangelo and the history of his time spent in Carrara obtaining marble for his projects are dwelt upon at length.

My biggest criticism about this book is that it is really two books in one: an historical fiction that traces the lives of several characters and an art history book. The book has page after page of descriptions of the history of art and sculpture that really do not add anything to the plot. The novel would be much more attainable to the reader if the art history sections were shortened and the focus of the book shifted more towards character development. I would like to have read more about Anna and Oliver's love affair and the reasons he decides to never return to Italy. I would like to have read more about Lino the sculptor and his emigration to Canada and the decision of Oliver's parents to adopt him and make him part of their family.

In short, FIGURES OF BEAUTY is both historical fiction and art history. It would be a much more successful book if the author concentrated on one genre.

Karen Klein says

Having a hard time with this...putting it away to start again at a later time.

Ivi says

Not really my style 1 star indeed

scherzo? says

"When Lino learned his trade in the Morrow studio in Carrar he was thrilled with the process of carving stone. The *sbozzatore* first roughs out the block with his point chisel. This is the beginning. Then the more detailed carvers work the stone, first with flat and claw chisels, then with an ever-more-fine system of rasps. Then the polishing."

Prologue: The Stone

Part One: The Point Chisel

Part Two: The Flat Chisel

Part Three: The Claw Chisel

Part Four: The Rasps

Part Five: Sand

Epilogue: Emery

"When my mother is asked by tourists or by some newcomers in the Cafe David in Pietrabella why she loves stone as much as she does, her answer surprises them. 'Because I can move around it,' she says. 'That's what space is for.'"

"It's something that distinguishes most mortals from gods, and most mortals from artists as great as Michelangelo and Constantin Brancusi. We don't often get to the essence of things. This shortcoming is particularly apparent when the object in question is time. When it comes to that particular dimension, gods think of us as morons."

I want to read this book again.

Lisa says

First, let me say, this book is not for everyone. This book is quiet. This book is languid in its prose. This is a book to be savored, slowly. It's difficult to describe the story, though the book jacket summary does as good a job as might be expected. The interwoven narratives, which jump back and forth through time, often create confusion--a jarring sense of disorientation, especially at first. My advice is to stick with it, you'll be glad you did. Eventually, ever so gradually, the narratives come together and all is revealed. However, by the end, this almost doesn't matter. Once you are hooked, it's all about the journey. If you love art, if you are sometimes stricken by unimagined beauty, if you've ever loved and lost, you will not be disappointed.

Note: I received this book through a Goodreads giveaway in exchange for a review.

Lauren says

I tried to get into this book. I tried especially hard because it was the first giveaway title I'd received and I was hoping to give it rave reviews. Unfortunately, I couldn't make it through the first quarter of the book. For me, the writing style was "choppy". Every time the momentum picked up, and I'd start to lose myself in the setting or character, it would end just as quickly. It just didn't flow for me, and I had to give up.

Hoping I don't ruin my chances of another First Reads selection, but I'm taking the risk and shelving this one.

Rowland says

This novel powerfully recalled for me my own brief spell in the sun, in my case in Uzes, South of France, during a liberal period when the French banking system was nationalized and nobody really noticed. My partner and I had a beautiful new baby daughter, we attended lunches and dinner parties, and often gave breakfasts on Saturday morning when we called for oysters from the vendor across the street, which we devoured with Picpoul de Pinet, a wine made on the slopes overlooking the marine lagoons where they were reared. We were wild and free and in love. David Macfarlane describes a similar period for a young Canadian who fell in love with a magnificent sculptress and unknowingly fathered a daughter by her. The descriptions of Michelangelo, Bernini and Brancusi are wonderfully pulled off, as is the Italian scenery around Carrara and its marble mines. Cathcart is also well imagined, and the tales of several of its leading residents told. A book I loved and devoured, thoroughly recommended.

Nancy says

Told in a series of vignettes that go back and forth through time, MacFarlane's story is about a young Canadian man who spends a summer in Italy and falls in love. Oliver Hughson meets Anna Di Castello, a

free spirit and a sculptor of marble, at a dinner party. There is a mutual attraction and the two young people enjoy the summer together until an illness calls Oliver back to Canada. Anna never forgives him for leaving.

What ties this story together through the years that pass is marble, both in its rough form in the quarries and as a finished and unique piece of art. Michelangelo believed the figure existed in the block of marble and it was his job to free it. It is this idea of constraint and freedom that permeates the book. It is filled with thorough descriptions of the artistic process and also of the dangers involved with quarrying the stone. Although I got a little lost sometimes when it wasn't entirely clear to whom, when or where the author was referring until the end of certain chapters, it wasn't a big problem. The chapters are short and the puzzle was soon solved.

This is a love story, but not just between the characters involved. It is also about passion for the artistic process and the beautiful marble imbedded in the mountains of Carrara, Italy. Though occasionally confusing, MacFarlane's book is richly detailed and always compelling.

Phil says

It's always great to discover a new author Canadian at that. David McFarlane's *The Figures of Beauty* is a thing of beauty. When I first heard that it dealt with sculpture I was skeptical. I soon discovered this was through my lack of knowledge. The descriptions of where marble comes from, the source of the great sculptures, the artists, and men who sweat and risk their lives to extract marble from the mountainside led me to a greater appreciation of sculptors and their works. An undertone is how things change over time how things change yet stone and rock don't. One of the top three books I read in 2013. As with all authors who intrigue me and entertain me and please me I must now read his earlier work *Summer Gone*.

Melissa says

The book is centered around sculpture, particularly marble sculpture. You travel through different time periods all which interconnect in some way through marble. The lush language puts you in Italy where most of the book takes place. In any time period, you can really travel with this author's words.

The story mostly follows Oliver, his doomed love story and his daughter. There are also references to artists, in particular Michelangelo as well as Anna (Oliver's lover and his daughter's mother) a present day non-figurative sculpture artist. The ventures back in time especially the ones in the 40s were intriguing but the time shifts just didn't come together for me. Yes, I did see a connection, but as an observer it didn't connect to me personally. It may be due to shifting constantly through time or that I never developed a connection to Oliver and his daughter. I think that if a book was made more about the past and it was constant, I think I would have enjoyed this book much more.

I give this book 2 1/2 stars. It is beautiful in the descriptions of the places, it has some interesting secondary characters, but I just didn't quite connect to much in this book. I would pick up a book by this author because of the beautiful writing, but this one didn't quite come together for me in the end.

