



## OLD FLAMES FLICKER

BY **LAUREN KIRSCHNER**

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WAS SHE PRETTY? by Leanne Shapton (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 208 pages, \$23 cloth. Rating: **NNN**

While reading *Was She Pretty?*, Toronto-raised, New York-based artist and writer Leanne Shapton's latest weird and wonderful offering, I kept thinking of a Dentyne gum commercial from the early 90s in which a guy takes his new date into a movie theatre and finds, to his mortification, that all the seats are occupied by his exes.

Taking as its premise a line from Kierkegaard in which he describes being bound to a chain of gloomy fancies - in Shapton's case, her rumination on her lover's exes - *Was She Pretty?* is a book rooted in romantic obsession, though it refreshingly works in the territory of curiosity and tenderness rather than jealousy.

Shapton's text is funny, frank and surprising, and her quirky black-and-white broad-stroke illustrations are a cousin to the smart melancholia of Daniel Clowes, of *Ghost World* fame.

The exes are sometimes described by occupation - artists, heiresses, PhDs, ballerinas - but more often by their lasting contribution to the lives of their lover.

Shapton's shining talent for shorthand characterization is occasionally a little too shorthand, however, and can leave a character seeming like trivia. Such is the case with poor, one-dimensional Sonya, whom we know only through her penchant for Japanese designer clothes.

At its best, Shapton's sharp writing sums up complex human emotions that in a novel could have taken a truckload of interior monologue.

Peculiar as it is poignant, *Was She Pretty?* is one of the more memorable graphic novellas of recent years.

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