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What I Was

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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Readers of Rosoff's previous books, **How I Live Now** and **Just In Case**, will know what a disturbing writer she is, and how disconcertingly she shifts the perspectives of time, place, reality and human relationships from those we are used to. **What I Was** maintains her remarkable gift for turning human life into an unfamiliar event. A disaffected 16-year-old boy, already expelled from two schools, is sent to a third, a minor public school on the Suffolk coast. One afternoon, on a cross-country run, he passes a dilapidated shack only yards from the sea, and at once becomes infatuated with its sole occupier, a boy his own age who has dropped out of society and lives a marginal existence by fishing and casual work. This is the story of their relationship in the following winter and its aftermath.

But then the perspectives shift. The story is set in 1962, but told in the mid-21st century, when that schoolboy is almost a hundred years old. Already in 1962 the eroding Suffolk coast is haunted by ghosts of the drowned medieval city, Dunwich, and the encroaching sea is washing steadily nearer to the shack. 80 years later it has swallowed not only the flimsy dwelling but the school itself, as environmental damage reinforces natural change. Neither time nor place is stable, or quite what it seems. Nor are people. 'Look more carefully,' the narrator is told by the crone who reads his fortune in the market, and so should the reader. The boy (or old man) also offers a series of rules culled from his experience. 'Trust no one.' 'There is no such thing as truth.' 'There are clues everywhere.' Indeed there are. Although **What I Was** is a kind of mystery story, the vigilant reader is given the means to solve it. It is also a love story, but there are plentiful clues to the true nature of this schoolboy's love, and that of the near-centenarian he will become. The schoolboy outsider falls in love not with another person, male or female, but with an image of himself as he wishes to be. **What I Was** is a highly original study of intense self-love, in all its sterility and solitude. Yet as before with Rosoff, this story of bleak and unstable existence ends on a surprising note of thanksgiving.

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