

Modern Love

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Constance De Jong. *Ugly Duckling* (SPD, dist.), \$18 trade paper (224p) ISBN 978-0-9915585-2-0

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The exploits of an eccentric cast are transformed into a showcase of the range and possibility of fiction in this reissue of De Jong's 1977 novel, a rare experimental work that renders the shedding of convention with genuine joy. "Everywhere I go I see losers," De Jong begins her book, "misfits like myself who can't make it in the world." Her main subjects are writer Charlotte and musician Roderigo, who are brought together in '70s New York by "something essentially feminine and masculine" despite being "slow to accept the ties of love. Ties were loathsome and love was suspect." Charlotte is fixated on Roderigo's Sephardic heritage, which becomes a jumping-off point for an exploration of Roderigo's exiled ancestor Ruiz's arrival in Elizabethan England, a place and time when "the world was full of energy and spangles." From there, De Jong leaps to the future and a hardboiled detective tracking down the now reclusive Roderigo on the coast of Oregon, where "the fantastic and the ordinary live side by side." These radical shifts in setting, tone, and genre are bewildering, but De Jong's authority over her story is absolute, breathing fresh life into the familiar premise of bohemian ennui. "One tiny insight is not enough," she writes in acknowledgment of the limits her book for "losers" might have, "but it's a start." (*May*)