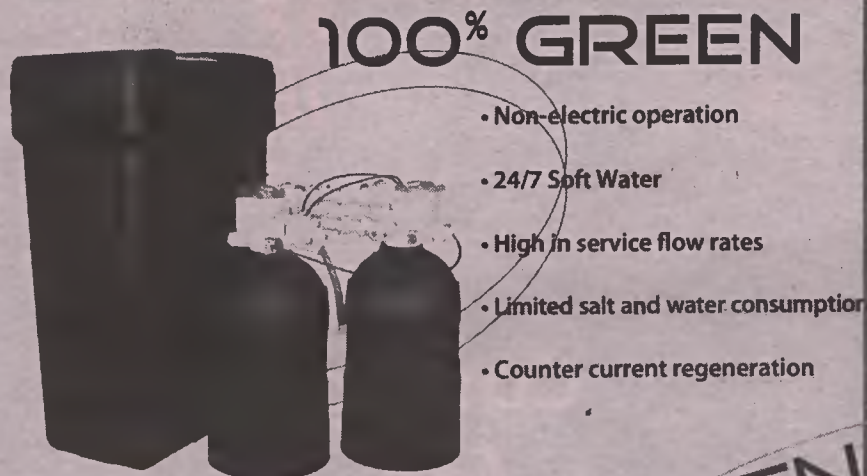




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## Book Talk

*The Diver's Clothes Lie Empty* by Vendela Vida  
Harper Collins, 2015

Review by Ken Wilkins

### Punctuated equilibrium

A blurb deemed Vendela Vida's *The Diver's Clothes Lie Empty* a cautionary tale for travelers, and that's what caught my attention. Unfortunately, the novel is far from that. It turns out to be a trite story of deceit and divorce, couched in a scenario that is simply unbelievable. The novel is set in Casablanca and, as the story opens, our heroine is on the plane for a visit, the circumstances of which are obscure. Also, in the entire work, she is addressed as "you," unusual to say the least, and eventually cloying and irritating.

Vida takes us on an adventure through the eyes of the narrator, whose name we never learn. Upon arrival at her hotel, her backpack with passport, credit cards and money is stolen. The police are called, and two days later return a backpack, credit cards and passport—none of which are hers. From here, she tries the American Embassy without much luck. One lie leads to another, and soon she cannot undo them.

Remarkably, she gets a job as a stand-in for an actress, paid in cash and with no need for documentation. The only interview for the job was with a bodyguard, who had a surprising interest in evolution, and who talked about "radical speciation" (also called punctuated equilibrium), a period of dramatic change that forces species to adapt rapidly or die out. Little did he realize that his interviewee had exactly that need to adapt to her new circumstances.

Predictably, the movie setup crashes and she flees. Here, we learn the reason for her trip in the first place. I won't give away the story; suffice it to say that the events exceed one's ability to suspend disbelief. And once our nameless narrator starts to lie, the deceptions never stop, down to the last line.

The title of Vida's novel comes from a poem by Rumi, "The Diver's Clothes Lying Empty," that appears in the book by convenient accident. Its subject is our ability to choose whether to be present in the moment. Our heroine is running away from circumstances that would be daunting to anyone, and Vida raises important questions about how we respond to adversity.

The narrator chooses, however, to continue to run from everyone she meets. As a result, she runs away from herself. Inadvertently, then, Vida reprises a theme from Kate Atkinson, who has explored alternative endings in her recent works. Our heroine here moves from one picture of herself to another. This blurring of reality is intriguing, but, ultimately, the writer fails to do much other than titillate.

The prose is straightforward and fine (with only one glaring use of the fad word "issues"). Vida is a talented writer. Her themes of identity and reality bear our scrutiny, but the far-fetched plot and the second-person voice detract too much from *The Diver's Clothes Lie Empty*. Perhaps, then, I was wrong. This novel may serve only as a reminder to hold on to your backpack while traveling in a strange place.



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