



## Still Life Las Vegas

*James Sie , Sungyoon Choi (Illustrations)*

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### **Still Life Las Vegas** James Sie , Sungyoon Choi (Illustrations)

An astonishing literary debut about a young man who, in the search for clues into the disappearance of his mother twelve years earlier, discovers himself in the process.

Recent high school graduate and aspiring artist Walter Stahl lives with his ailing father in the dregs of Las Vegas, their lives overshadowed by the disappearance of Walter's mother, who drove off when he was five and never returned. Although Walter has never so much as seen a photograph of his mother, it doesn't stop him from keeping an eye out for her in the groups of tourists he caters to in his dead-end job along the Strip.

Then Walter meets Chrysto and Acacia, a brother and sister working as living statues at the Venetian Hotel, and his world cracks open. Spending less time caring for his father, and more time riding on the backs of Vespas and drawing, Walter finds life has more to offer than he could have imagined. But as his feelings for Chrysto deepen, and as clues behind his mother's disappearance start to reveal themselves, Walter is forced to face the truth about himself and his family history.

Threading through this coming-of-age story are beautiful and heart-wrenching graphic illustrations, depicting how Walter's mother Emily, a Vietnamese-born accordion player, abandoned her family to chase a vision of Liberace across the country; and how Walter's father went searching for her amongst the gondolas of the Venetian Hotel.

In *Still Life Las Vegas*, the magical collides with the mundane; memory, sexual awakening and familial ties all lead to a place where everything is illuminated, and nothing is real.

### **Still Life Las Vegas Details**

Date : Published August 11th 2015 by St. Martin's Press

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Author : James Sie , Sungyoon Choi (Illustrations)

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## From Reader Review Still Life Las Vegas for online ebook

### Tom Mula says

Wow! I loved it!

How rare—something new, a genuinely novel novel. This is a sexy, hilarious, heartbreaking funhouse ride through sequined American culture—Vegas, Liberace, anti-depressants, accordions. I couldn't put it down. I read the last third in one sitting, and, after I wiped my eyes, I was sorry to leave this dreamlike and dream-filled world. The graphic chapters are delightful, like treats in a fruitcake—delicious surprises that deepen and enrich.

James Sie is a genuine old-world tale-spinner, and this is a fabulous yarn, full of surprises, with the senseless sense of a dream, or life, or great art: part Neil Gaiman, part John Irving, part (honest to God) Mark Twain and Homer.

Don't miss it.

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### Lora says

The way the plot line was arranged was incredible; the characters in the story are intriguing; it was a very difficult book to put down...I just had to read it all once I got started.

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### Jim says

With a blend of personal and classical mythology, Still Life Las Vegas tells three stories that weave together about a troubled family.

Walter longs to graduate high school early, and find a purpose for his burgeoning drawing talents. But he's burdened by caring for his depressive father, Owen, and we find out why in back story chapters. Walter's mother had run off, and he and his father now live in Vegas after failing to find her.

When Walter meets the beguiling living sculpture performers Chrystos and his sister, his sedentary - and closeted- life as a tour guide is upended. Add a Liberace devotee Lee to his mother's journey of accordion-playing and loss, and the strange tale unfolds.

With a behind-the-scenes look at working class Vegas life, this unusual setting combines tragic loss and a meager hope for redemption and escape.

Sungyoon Choi's graphic novel pages add a magical flourish to this unusual story, or, more accurately, this trio of inter-related stories.

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## **Kristin says**

What do you do when the power is out? Write a review, of course. I'm sitting here, writing up this review with only the light from my laptop screen, and a candle that smells like lemon Pez, to guide me.

It's oddly fitting for a review of Still Life Las Vegas by James Sie.

You see, Walt, our main character, has been in the dark about the whereabouts of his mother his entire life. With a father that is suffering from major mental illness over several tragedies in his life, you Walt is left to take care of him — and their run down apartment in a not-so-glitzy part of Las Vegas.

Walt is trapped. He feels an obligation to take care of his father that pulls at him so strongly, he's even resigned the idea of going to college. He has no plans for his future, nothing that doesn't involve the daily care of his ailing father.

That is until he meets Chrysto, one of the living statues at Venice Venice.

I'm going to come right out and say this: This book is a bit of a downer. There are hardly moments of happiness, and there's a lot of pain being experienced by every character in the book in their own way. It may not be the same pain, but it's there. But I have to say that this just felt perfectly right. The further I foraged into this book the clearer it became that wrapping it all up in a pretty bow and sending it off on its way was not a possibility. I probably would've felt cheated if that had happened. This book was meant to be gritty, raw, and in your face, but it never veers too far into melodrama territory, and I appreciated that.

With the way the story is told, it's very easy to latch on to all of these characters for their own reasons. Owen (Walt's father), for his demons and regrets, Emily (Walt's mother) for her insurmountable grief, Walt, for everything he has lost before he even really knew he had it, Chrysto and Acacia, the brother and sister living statues, and even in ways frigid ol' Vee. Each of them has a pain and a story that keeps you reading.

It also makes you question a lot of the events of the book the further you go along. I won't post spoilers, but there is a certain point in the book where I had to stop reading, think over what I had already read, and try and decide what was true. There are so many layers to this book that it's impossible to feel bored.

Finally, the friendship turned relationship between Walt and Chrysto. It's really what got me to read this book in the first place, and I was not disappointed. There was chemistry between these two from the word go, and it was built up perfectly with each scene between them. It made the scene where things finally do culminate and the boys begin engaging in a sexual relationship that much better.

The bottom line here is that I came for the romance and stayed for the amazing plot progression, storytelling, and graphic novel visual that were brilliantly done and woven in by Sungyoon Choi. Still Life Las Vegas is a true gem.

\*Thank you Netgalley for providing me with a ARC of Still Life Las Vegas in exchange for an honest review\*

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## **Tova Dean says**

James Sie is a writer who takes risks, something I always look for in a novel. I was not disappointed. He has a fine tuned sense of how to change points of view, and to also move a story along with the lovely addition

of a few pages in graphic novel format, expertly drawn by Sungyoon Choi. Of course I turned to the illustrated pages first so one important plot point was revealed before the storyteller, but knowing only added to the emotional drive of the characters. Others added suspense and much depth when both the written story and the illustrated story came together. Beware the unreliable narrator, though and just rest assured that someone as good as Walter will become a force in his world no matter what obstacles the gods push at him.

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### **Jo Dervan says**

This is a story about Walter, a 17 year old Vitnamese-American boy who has been living in a seedy area of Las Vegas with his disabled, prescription drug dependent father Owen. The family was originally from the MidWest and was composed of a Vietnamese mother and a baby sister as well as Walter and Owen. First the baby sister died in an overheated car and then the mother drove the family car to Las Vegas in hopes of killing herself at the Liberace Museum.

Walter believed his father who told him that his Mom had fled to Las Vegas and was still living there. So Walter kept looking for Emily in every Asian woman he saw in Las Vegas. He had graduated from high school and was working at a dead end job when he met Christos and Acacia, a brother -sister team who performed as living statues in a casino

Walter fell in love with Christos. It was not until Vee, his Mother's adopted mother, came to see him in Las Vegas that Walter learned truth about his family.

The book is told ifrom several point of views (Walter, his Dad Owen and his Mom Emily. Here is little character development. It also has graphic novel sections interspersed throughout the book and that made the book somewhat confusing.

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### **Carolyn Guerrero says**

Still Life Las Vegas is an interesting read - while the story is dark, and often depressing, there are moments of clear joy that jump out of the story and give the reader a smile. For me, the story was addicting. I finished the novel shortly after I began reading it, so captivated by the writing. James Sie writes well; the story is told from three different perspectives, and each has a unique, captivating voice. Sungyoon Choi's illustrations also do well, enhancing the novel and bringing to light its characters.

All in all, a very good read.

(I received this novel through GoodRead's First Reads program.)

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### **Doris says**

I cannot say enough good things about this book! I loved it. It will stay with me for a long time. I recommend that if you enjoy a good story you give this your attention.

I could not put it down! I read it in one day.

Wonderfully written, amazingly put together. When I found out the lie I cried. I couldn't believe how much I cared about Walter, Emily and Owen.

Caution, look at the wonderful art work as you read along. If you look through it ahead of time it will spoil the story for you.

## Larry H says

When Walter was five years old, his mother left their family, driving away in her blue Volvo, and he never saw her again. Now 17, living a monotonous existence away from the Las Vegas strip and taking care of his bedridden father, he has spent the last 12 years searching for her, hoping that she'll someday mysteriously reappear in her life as quickly as she left it.

Working a dead-end job at a museum on Fremont Street, he has his whole life ahead of him but feels he has not much to live for. And then one day he meets Chrysto and Acacia, siblings who work as living statues at The Venetian. Their beauty and passion awaken something in Walter, and he suddenly finds himself looking forward to the end of work days so he can spend time in their presence. He also finds that Chrysto is making him feel things he never expected to, but isn't sure if he should trust anyone not to leave him.

James Sie's *Still Life Las Vegas* is more than just the story of a young man living under the specter of loss and abandonment. It tells the story of Emily, Walter's mother, and what led her to abandon her family, as well as the story of Owen, Walter's father, how he lost control of his life and his love, and how he ekes out an existence without both. It's also the story of how we shape the truth to help us cope, not realizing the ramifications that our version of the truth might have on others around us.

As you might imagine from the plot, this is a very moving story. Walter is a character you feel for, although you want him to strive for more, feel more, and begin living his life for himself. The emotion of the story is both complemented and supplemented by some beautiful comics-like illustrations by Sungyoon Choi, and at times, key moments in the plot reveal themselves through these illustrations.

My challenge with this book is the way it was told. Chapters fluctuate between Walter in the present, Emily from childhood through the moments after she makes the decision to leave, and Owen's search for his wife, but there isn't any linear order to the chapters, so I felt the story revealed itself in fits and starts, and at times it dulled some of its emotion. But while some of the discoveries Walter makes may not surprise, they still touch your heart, and his story finds its way inside your mind.

See all of my reviews at <http://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blo...>

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## Sofia says

Fluid interaction between the written word and snippets in graphic art. I love the use of language and the pictures and how he played with time, fantasy and reality.

A tragedy of love, hope, pain, despair and from all this Walt rises like the phoenix after the fire. Beautifully told by Sie. His words create images, beautiful ones which are then further emphasized by Choi's art. He uses contrasts like feathers and stone - a feather is light able to float through a disaster whilst the strong stone can crack when it meets disasters head on. The imagery is then translated to the story and the characters themselves so we have Walt soaring like Icarus, Emmie cracking under the weight, Owen flattened but hanging on. The story is full of such images the softness of Walt - the hardness of Chrysto, Orpheus saving Eurydice and then looking back, the music - the silence and more and more. I can totally lose myself in it searching for hidden meanings and than marvelling when I see or find a thought.

Reading this I came to really care for Emmie, Owen and Walt, I feel for them, their tragedy and hoped so so much. (view spoiler)

I recommend reading of the ebook in a device that will allow you to zoom in on the graphic part.

A lovely read with Lena

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## **Lena♥Ribka says**

The 28th Lammy's PREPARATIONS: a finalist in the category GAY FICTION.

THAT WAS A DEBUT NOVEL?! WOW!

**Beautiful, poetic, tragic, emotional, honest, thrilling, and...OPTIMISTIC!**

Don't be afraid to read it, you'll be rewarded with a UNIQUE, UNUSUAL, FANTASTIC story of LOVE..the first love, the last love, the hidden love, the fake love, the true love...the lost love...

No, actually it is about LIFE.

**An amazing debut.**

Highly highly recommended!

*Reading with my buddy Sofia. It is always a pleasure!*

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## **Patricia Linville says**

Still life Las Vegas by James Sie

Everyone at some time or other has been too busy to take note of what needs immediate attention. Mind a million miles away until a tragic incident forces all focus on the present moment. A small family attempting to navigate the permanent consequences of distraction is the idea upon which James Sie's book is built. Still Life Las Vegas is about the slender thread upon which we balance ourselves and what happens when it is stretched, frayed and finally broken. Teenager Walter Stahl lives with his father, a former professor of Greek mythology, now spending his days abed in a drugged stupor. They have moved west looking for Walter's mother who ran away sometime "earlier." Against the plastic backdrop that is Las Vegas, including Liberace and the gondolas of the Venetian, Walter navigates toward adulthood searching for the Vietnamese woman that was his mother. Enroute, he learns more than he wants to know about his family's past and the world in general. Sie expertly creates believable characters in unbelievable yet plausible situations, especially considering the Las Vegas environment. The mixture of prose and graphic novel styles works mostly,

especially in the beginning. Recommended for those who like their contemporary fiction thoughtful and a little bit crazy.

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### **Karen Street says**

A warm and innovative debut novel about a young man, Walter Stahl, who is caught up in his father's search for Walter's run-away mother, and in the process discovers himself. I thoroughly enjoyed this Las Vegas-set story, told from the point of view of Walter, a precocious young man who is learning to be an artist and his own person. The characters are interesting because they are all rather difficult people, not unlike the quirky oddness of the neon city itself. I adored Emily, his Vietnamese-born, accordion playing mother, and the juxtaposition of the snippets of her childhood with Walter's life in the present worked very well. Meeting living statues Chrysto and Acacia, who have their own peculiar quest, makes Walter take charge of his own life and desires after years of caring for his father. The complex structure of flashbacks and different points of view works wonderfully well to set up a mystery that Walter must solve if he is to truly move forward. While I liked the idea of the graphic illustrations, I wasn't sure how they would work in the context of the novel; happily they are not a contrivance, but rather deepen the emotion of some of the strongest emotional scenes in the book, functioning almost like a storyboard. The tone of the writing and the playful kitsch of Liberace, Vegas, oddball performers, and an accordion soundtrack mesh beautifully to form a story with real heart.

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### **KatieMc says**

Really good writing with a graphic novel layered in, creating a story within a story. I have recently enjoyed a few graphic novels, and while they are not my favorite medium, I do appreciate them. That said, I really liked this author's writing and I would really like to experience it as just the written word.

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### **Lenny says**

James Sie's debut novel, "Still Life Las Vegas" combines storylines and emotions in a simmering ragout, taking seemingly disparate themes and settings and putting them together to create a memorable and unique (I rarely use that word) world, one in which there are the soaring highs of young love crossed with the eternal lows of young death. Tragedy mars the life of the main character, Walter Stahl. In fact, it has caused his life to come to a veritable stop in the garish world of Las Vegas. There, Walter slinks through his stilled life, giving tours at a dingy "museum" dedicated to Liberace.

Walter is trapped by the needs of his depressed, ailing father, Owen, and the desperate search for his mother, Emily. When Walter was five, and the family was living in Wisconsin, Emily took off in a blue Volvo never to return. At that time, Owen left Walter with his mother-in-law and ran after her to Las Vegas, and somehow, that's how the two of them ended up living there.

There is deep sorrow in the book, as loss and blame seem to suck the life out of these woeful characters, but there is also great humor to balance out this delectable stew of a story. On the very first page of the book Emily is making her escape, and plans to drive over the nearest cliff, "or, rather, it being Wisconsin, the nearest steep embankment." However, she finds that she can't quite do it, and her thoughts turn to the future .

. . and Colorado. “Now there were some cliffs worth driving over.” It’s only the first page and Sie manages to make me chuckle about someone who wants to commit suicide.

Stuck in the present, Walter finds solace in sketching, and spends breaks from work drawing two “living sculptures.” One day, when some drunken patrons are insulting the statues and about to throw garbage at them, he tackles the men. For his heroism, the statues finally come to life (as in the Pygmalion myth), and Walter meets Chrysto, and his sister, Acacia. Through this meeting, Walter comes of age, both sexually and emotionally. Like Chrysto’s speeding scooter, Walter’s life will finally move forward, with the friendship of this charismatic man acting as catalyst.

The novel moves back and forth in time, showing us the Stahl family’s heartbreaks. Sie deftly juggles the storylines, revealing themes of mythology, art as savior, parent/child struggles, and tales of truth that turn to lies. There are chases, crazy characters (Big Bang and Little Bang), ouzo consumption, statue destruction, and old people aiding our young hero. Love blooms, and percolates.

Sie’s style is fluid and simple, yet sumptuous, easily bringing the reader back and forth in time, building to a melancholy, but hopeful conclusion. He has collaborated with Sungyoon Choi, an illustrator who adds a few sections of graphic novel. These sections are well done and add to the otherworldliness of the story, deepening the themes of myth, love, and death. The revelation of the cause of Owen’s depression is a stunner, and Choi’s illustrations make it all the more agonizing and heart-rending.

“Still Life Las Vegas” is a most assured debut by a writer who is obviously familiar with heartbreak, and knows how to write about it, too. If you’re in the mood for something unique and stirring, I definitely recommend this novel, and I look forward to Sie’s next work.

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