

★ **A Fist around the Heart**

Heather Chisvin

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Heather Chisvin's pensive, eloquent novel traces the paths of two Russian Jewish sisters: one based in Winnipeg, the other in Manhattan; one who commits suicide, one a survivor left with unanswerable questions. It reveals the trauma that follows immigrants to new shores.

When Anna is called back to Canada, where she and her elder sister, Esther, were sent as children to avoid pogroms, she refuses to believe that Esther's death was a suicide. Through exchanges with a local inspector, her sister's journals, well-timed flashbacks, and a spiraling journey through her own memories, Anna weighs key events that shaped her family. A history of loss leads to a haunting portrait of Esther's mental illness.

With a graceful, realistic balance of fondness and dismay, Esther is drawn through Anna's memories as a fragile, elusive beauty, as much a burden as she is beloved. Anna, who left her adopted family's home under difficult circumstances, is made stronger by necessity.

Determined to stay in New York on her own terms, she moves from a position sewing coats in a factory to thriving as a door-to-door saleswoman. Along the way, modern activism and feminism arrive in the form of Margaret Sanger, whose influence shapes Anna's perspective. A few romances add color to an otherwise brooding plot.

Masterful in its bleak, wintry landscapes, measured pacing, and unspoken rifts between a Russia that no longer exists and a new world that for Esther never entirely paves over a violent past, Chisvin's work strikes deep chords and captures the pain of caring for someone who is slipping away.

As Anna recounts segments of her life alongside Esther's, the differences between them leave chasms that no one can cross: why one mind retreats while another finds ways to press forward, and why, despite all the signs, suicide still comes as a shock when it happens. *A Fist around the Heart* is a dark psychological gem.

KAREN RIGBY (March/April 2018)

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