



A Small Crowd of Strangers

Joanna Rose

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Beneath the tranquil developments of Joanna Rose's coming-of-adulthood novel *A Small Crowd of Strangers* lie dire possibilities, but also the hope of meeting one's authentic self.

Now thirty and absent a sense of definitive direction, New Jersey librarian Pattianne becomes a collector and cataloger of impressions and possibilities. She delights in Mozart, the bubblegum pink of a stranger's lips, the clink of ice in a glass, a bartender's long body, and the freedom that a twenty-eight-hour work week affords her.

Then Pattianne meets beautiful, Catholic Michael. Though, following a mention of Easter Mass, "a warning tried to sneak into her brain," she lets herself be carried away: by the warmth of their nesting, by the glitter of a garnet, by whispers of continuing family traditions. Soon, Michael and Pattianne are married and on their way to Minnesota.

In St. Cloud, Pattianne keeps collecting delights: hoar frost, Michael's mismatched vintage plates, the yellow flash of a bird, and a quiet job in a New Age bookstore. But Pattianne doesn't love that she has to hide her birth control from Michael, or that he's joined a prayer group that stages protests outside of Planned Parenthood. Unfeeling religion threatens her nascent happiness.

When Pattianne's thoughtless comments to two believers result in a lost job and a death, both for acquaintances whom she's come to love, she takes the only option left: she runs. She goes all the way to Vancouver, following the promise of a silver tide, and with an aging hound, Bullfrog, at her side. There, she finally begins the brutal work of determining who she'd like to become.

A Small Crowd of Strangers is a lovely story about a young woman whose unchecked yearning leads her somewhere true—even if she takes the long path in getting there.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September / October 2020)

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