

## A Strange Country

**Muriel Barbery**

**Alison Anderson, Translator**

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In Muriel Barbery's bewitching *A Strange Country*, elves and humans cross the boundaries that separate their lands, hoping to correct a travesty that's playing out in the "theater of worlds."

In a land of mists, an unusual elf has visions of verdant landscapes and strange beings. In war-torn Spain, a nobleman and a fisherman's son fight to preserve the land of their ancestors, though all of their might can't stop families from being destroyed or keep lakes from drying up.

Because the soldiers are so conversant with life's absurdities, they are receptive when elves turn up in a castle wine cellar, offering upside down champagne and beckoning them to their destinies—not on the battlefields of Europe, but in a fight against the deadly torpor that threatens the elves' colorless, vibrant world. That stillness has implications for the human world, too. The elf and the warriors work together to preserve the delicate balance of the universe.

Poetic and prophetic musings unwind the book's mythology in bits. Their lines permeate the boundaries between worlds. Lengthy conversations over ancient tea mute the horrors of the human war before the book skips back to relate how the inhabitants of the land of mists were lulled into complacency by calculating villains who aren't content to destroy one world alone.

It's a delicious surprise that the elf most poised to impede that wicked plot is a misfit squirrel, Petrus, who's chubby, clumsy, and a favorite among his protective kin. Bored by the mist land's seemingly endless delights, Petrus bumbles away from home and stumbles upon prophecies; his happenstance quest, and all of its winking discoveries, lighten the book's surrounding darkness.

Aestheticism and allegiances are the cure for moral stupor in the enchanting hero's journeys of *A Strange Country*.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March / April 2020)

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