

Cecilia: A Novella**K-Ming Chang**

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K-Ming Chang's *Cecilia* is a surreal novella about the intense, intoxicating memories that surface when an outcast reencounters her childhood best friend.

In childhood, Seven's friendship with Cecilia was passionate to the point of brutality. They shared an alienating identity of fatherlessness, and they delighted and tormented each other in equal measure. Insecure Seven fantasized about eating her more confident friend to make their bond stronger. Her desire for Cecilia became all-consuming.

The story begins about ten years after the former friends lost contact. Most of it plays out in Seven's recollections of the past. She is still haunted by her superstitious mother's implication that she was born a predator. And she despairs that she is different in some evil way: "everyone in this world was born with an innate knowledge ... I alone was born without this manual."

Seven feels revulsion toward society's male-centric expectations and deep, unidentified shame, but she seems to lack the language to pinpoint one implied truth about herself—that she is queer (a term never explicitly used in her otherwise candid narration). She also deliberately denies facing who Cecilia has become, viewing this unfamiliar adult as an interloper from whom she must protect her cherished memories. That guardedness results in some abruptness and ambiguity.

The book's atmosphere is unsettling, littered with visceral sensory descriptions of eerie colors and sinister metaphors. There are graphic depictions of bodily functions too. Seven tells fantastical stories with violent, animalistic motifs: there are crows who hold grudges; an organ imbues its cannibalistic consumer with supernatural abilities. Her severe, straightforward voice makes it unclear whether these grotesque tales are meant to be taken as myths or facts.

Cecilia is a novel that reveals the power—and dangers—of women's friendships through evocative, uncanny prose.

JENNA LEFKOWITZ (May / June 2024)

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