

Ceremonials

Katharine Coldiron

Kernpunkt Press (Feb 11, 2020)

Softcover \$14.99 (130pp)

978-1-73232-515-9

Gloom and grief coalesce in Katharine Coldiron's delicate *Ceremonials*, a poetic love story between classmates that erases the line between the living and the dead.

Inspired by Florence + the Machine's album of the same name, this experimental novella embeds in its text references to lyrics and parallels between specific tracks and the book's main events, resulting in pleasing familiarity. Upon these it overlays its own moody impressions of rituals and obsession.

Somewhere in the 1900s, orphaned Amelia lost her love, Corisande, to suicide by drowning. Years later, Amelia is an adult who sings at a speakeasy; she's had many lovers since, but is still beguiled by jealous Corisande. She communes with an afterlife version of Corisande who's poised somewhere between reality and wish fulfillment. As she joins her boarding school peers at graduation, Amelia has visions of Corisande that revive the pain of her loss. Tactile, intricate prose captures Amelia's troubled emotions and her sometimes distracted viewpoint, pinpointing heightened sensations and images.

Corisande narrates the day of her drowning with riffs on songwriter Florence Welch's "pockets full of stones." A fateful boating excursion becomes a stylized fantasy featuring the two girls, who liken their relationship to those of Lewis & Clark and Jane Eyre & Helen.

Spare vignettes featuring both characters are breathed into a haunting, enigmatic echo chamber. Love threatens to engulf Amelia, whose reluctance to break free is expressed in an arresting mixture of fear and habit. When she does choose a future for herself, it's not as separate from the past as she thinks. In a circular, fitting twist, she ends up recounting Corisande's story.

Ceremonial is a ghostly novella—a tribute to music and romance, unusual in its blend of powerful visuals and morphing feelings. Its depiction of defining relationships is both heartening and terrifying.

KAREN RIGBY (January / February 2020)

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