



Cormorant Lake

Faith Merino

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With a dash of magical realism, Faith Merino's novel *Cormorant Lake* concerns the meanings and complexities of motherhood and family.

When Evelyn comes home to find one of her roommate Erin's children thrashing, alone, in her bath water, something snaps in her. In the middle of the night, she leaves, taking her roommate's daughters to the home of her foster mother, Nan, which she left a decade prior. In that small mountain town, where there are no secrets, Evelyn also reconnects with her biological mother, Jubilee.

The chapters alternate between Nan and Evelyn's viewpoints, telling overlapping, fantastical stories. They cover Cormorant Lake's history and the women's pasts. Nan's otherworldly conversations and surfacing flashbacks contrast with Evelyn's fears that Erin will find them. Her hustle to provide for the children leaves her working two jobs, all while trying to reconcile herself to her past and present romantic relationships. The connections between Evelyn, Nan, and Jubilee are understated and devastating, resulting in unexpected tenderness.

Ideas about what it means to mother, who decides what good mothering is, and what makes a family are stretched, broken apart, examined, and put back together again, though they are never defined in explicit terms. The novel demands close attention, evades tidy resolutions, and proves to be adept at capturing what it means to care for others, covering the sacrifices, pain, joy, and connections that such work involves.

Filled with sharp observations, *Cormorant Lake* is a novel about families, both chosen and otherwise, in which broad realities exist in nice contrast with fantastical elements.

JAIME HERNDON (January / February 2021)

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