

Cuttle

Chelsea Britain

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In Chelsea Britain's contemporary novel *Cuttle*, a quirky, scholarly heroine navigates the rocky shoals of academia and the risky shores of adult relationships.

After eight years of grad school, analytical, problem-solving Nora is an expert on cuttlefish, but is all the more unsure about her ability to succeed in the nonacademic world. She leaves a tepid, long-term relationship and prepares cuttlefish for their transition to a public aquarium; in the process, she draws parallels between their and her situation, displaying intelligence, dedication, and respect for fellow creatures.

Nora's narration touches on the exposed nerves of graduate school life, including competition for faculty backing, sexism, research pilfering, and awareness that the brutal descent from being a star student to a newbie employee is just a step away. Once the cuttlefish are moved, and despite her outward accomplishments, she focuses more on romance, indulges in break-up ice cream, and binges on nineties sitcoms. Coincidences bring new, interested men into Nora's orbit, too.

With people, Nora engages in a kind of reverse anthropomorphism, understanding others in terms of layered animal similes: her roommate Heather, who runs the university's equine breeding program, bobs like a stall-weaving horse and growls like a Morgan in heat. As such, distance remains between Nora and other people; her interest is most piqued by cephalopods. Momentum is generated by Nora applying for a research fellowship, even though it means competing against a colleague who can affect her future. Her sense of purpose restored, she opens up to an upturn in opportunities for love.

Working toward a happy ending, the post-grad novel *Cuttle* glows with interest and graceful writing whenever cephalopods are on the scene.

SUSAN WAGGONER (July / August 2020)

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