



Isle

Jes Dory

FriesenPress (Feb 25, 2016)

Softcover \$18.99 (360pp)

978-1-4602-7527-6

An epic fantasy plot combines with a young woman's struggles to come of age and understand herself in this cinematic novel.

Isle by Jes Dory is both a bildungsroman and an adventure story. The novel grounds all its twists, turns, and abundance of magical lore in the emotional journey of its protagonist, Eleanora Stone.

After seventeen years of moving around from city to city, Nora's aunt Ada takes them both back to Stone Isle, Maine. This return to the secluded and densely forested island is not just a homecoming for Nora, who hasn't been there since her parents died when she was a child, but also brings about an awakening. There, she discovers not only new abilities within herself, but also secrets from her family history.

Nora is thrust into a world of danger and prophecies, love and horror. She struggles to control her newfound powers, to regain trust in her aunt, and above all, to survive in the centuries-old war between magical beings. Nora experiences emotions deeply and uncontrollably, especially anger and passion, and this colors the relationships around her.

The most genuine and touching of all of Nora's relationships is the one she shares with her aunt Ada. She is not only Nora's only living family but also the woman who raised her and loved her all her life. When Nora discovers that Ada has been lying to her all that time, there is real heartbreak and betrayal, but what makes the relationship so genuine is that beneath all of that, there is still love.

In the face of magical prophecies, superhuman abilities, and mystical lore, *Isle* grounds itself by focusing on Nora's relationships and emotions, which keeps the character relatable even in the novel's most fantastical moments. That emotional grounding becomes necessary when *Isle* delves deeper into its own lore.

While most of the story's mythology is paced out well, there are points in the novel that read more like a textbook as it expounds paragraphs of new dates, names, and events. This world-building is necessary, but more often than not, it is simply told to Nora when she asks rather than being incorporated into the plot itself. Fortunately, Nora's strong presence as a character makes these tellings closer to an emotional experience than a history lesson.

Isle has a very cinematic feel to it. The imagery is dramatic, the action larger than life, and the scenery rendered in strong, bombastic hues. Stone Isle and its woods and oceans are transformed almost into set pieces. Nora's nightmares are written in gory detail and laced with horrific images: ocean depths and bloody dungeons. The intense imagery results in an atmosphere of dread that at times feels almost chaotic, matching Nora's story arc through the novel.

Isle couples an epic fantasy plot with all of a young woman's struggles to come of age and understand herself. It is a novel about family, war, destiny, and choice.

CLARISSA GOLDSMITH (March 31, 2016)

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