

It's In Our Nature

Jacqueline T. Small

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It's In Our Nature is an entertaining fantasy novel with strong roots in Black American culture.

Jacqueline T. Small's fantasy novel *It's In Our Nature* focuses on a family whose members are gifted in the occult.

The La Magies are members of the Black Star coven, a long line of witches and warlocks that runs from Louisiana all the way back to Africa. Recently relocated to Philadelphia, they hope to lead normal lives. They practice their witchcraft in secret, but soon the prying eyes of the US Department of Homeland Security are upon them, leading to numerous narrow escapes and adventures.

The book alternates between being a domestic comedy and its more sober reflections on racial justice and harmony. The La Magie family comprises an engaging collection of personalities: Jack is the mild-mannered head of the family; Belle is his brash older daughter; his younger daughter, Jane, is just getting inducted into the ranks of witches. Even the induction ceremony touches on themes of political commitment and personal fulfillment, as each witch declares different intentions for her craft, from righting social wrongs to trying to lead a happy life. And as the La Magies struggle to “fit in,” parallels are drawn between their outsiders' status and the plight of Black Americans: police injustices against Black people in their neighborhood lead to the witches revealing their powers to the public.

The novel is at its best when it views its serious themes through a fantastical lens. In this slightly off-center world, witches are surveilled and prosecuted by the Department of Homeland Security; when agents start to build a case against the La Magies, the witches counter by casting spells that prompt important eyewitnesses to forget what they've seen, and recruiting lawyers to protect their rights. On the lighter side, a visit to a local haunted house on Halloween fails to impress the children—after all, they've seen far stranger things in their everyday lives.

But the novel is heavy on exposition and explanation, and every so often, it gestures towards darker elements. Zoey la Pearl, the head witch of the coven, threatens dire consequences against the Homeland Security agents, including “dropping” their family members if necessary. A confrontation with an armed policeman results in a gun getting magically “appropriated” and fired; while no one is injured, it's a scene fraught with danger. Indeed, most of the characters are presented on dichotomous terms, with the witches always being in the right. There's no moral ambiguity to anyone's actions as a result.

The novel tips into science fiction territory when one of the La Magie daughters is kidnapped and imprisoned in Area 51—here, replete with living, breathing aliens. This forces Jack to undertake a rescue mission with a relative. While it's an exciting change of pace, the episode is an awkward fit with the rest of the narrative. Still, the book ends on a note that leaves room for a sequel, and includes a set of questions designed to prompt rich classroom discussions.

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