

★ **Jawbone**

Mónica Ojeda

Sarah Booker, Translator

Coffee House Press (Feb 8, 2022)

Softcover \$16.95 (272pp)

978-1-56689-621-4

In Mónica Ojeda's sinuous novel *Jawbone*, six wealthy private school girls form a dangerous clique.

The six girls share obsessions with Instagram, crocodiles, La Llorona, Slender Man, and the cropped chic of "Mia-Farrow-in-Rosemary's-Baby's-hair." They meet after school in a half-constructed building, now abandoned except for pigeons, lizards, and snakes. This vast space is their "anti-parent, anti-teacher, anti-nanny headquarters."

Among the group, Fernanda and Annelise are called "the inseparables." They are neurotic and adventurous, and their twin-like bond is charged with morbid eroticism. But Fernanda has also been seeing a therapist since she was a child. There, she discusses her nightmares, conflicts, and feelings toward Annelise. She also talks about her dead baby brother, Martín, offering alternate versions as to whether she did or did not kill him. Annelise's dark, precocious intelligence leads her to create her own gods, including a magnificent, sparkling drag queen whose "eyelashes [lift] all the wet earth" from her heart.

Meanwhile, Clara, a teacher who's been traumatized and abused, lives in terror and defiance, avoiding becoming a victim again. As a form of protection, she dresses like her deceased mother, in a "maternal-style" wardrobe of long skirts and satin blouses. Clara tries to hide her intense anxiety and panic attacks, but like "six wicked blades," the girls undermine her. Clara is moved to kidnap Fernanda in a preemptive strike; she holds the girl hostage in an isolated cabin.

Despite the familiar undergirding of its privileged, manipulative school girls, *Jawbone* distinguishes itself through fevered brilliance. Clara's struggles stand in vulnerable, vengeful contrast to the girl's behavior. Like the strange bloom of a corpse flower, the novel *Jawbone* evokes life, death, and a vortex of twisted beauty.

MEG NOLA (January / February 2022)

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