

★ **Jewel Box: Stories**

E. Lily Yu

Erewhon Books (Oct 24, 2023)

Hardcover \$26.95 (400pp)

978-1-64566-048-4

The tales of E. Lily Yu's brilliant, sparkling collection *Jewel Box* are fantastical, rich, and strange. They brim with imagination and insights and are diverse when it comes to geography and cultural details.

Here, inanimate objects take on wondrous life: a lamp post falls in unrequited love with a red-jacketed young man; a prayer rug delivers a pious Muslim to Mecca on hajj and then to Florida to see his son one last time. Anthropomorphism in the animal kingdom reveals human fallibility in subversive tales that take on the relationship between cartography and colonization: a wasp colony maps out provinces and conquers a hive of bees. Elsewhere, alien refugees challenge international diplomacy in a world skint of resources.

The prose is exquisite on a sentence-by-sentence level. Two great retold fairy tales—of Puss in Boots and “The Emperor’s New Clothes”—are included; another story focuses on a maiden who ventures out to save her townspeople when their eyes are stolen by a magician. But it’s not all fairy tales: gaming, the law of physics, and Fermi’s Paradox wind through the collection, blending fables with science and adding intellectual layers to playful, sometimes laugh-out-loud stories.

The realistic stories in the collection are heartrending: a friend tracks down and captures a unicorn in Central Park, hoping that a miracle will save her friend from dying; an astronaut faces time dilation in deep space—and the impossible decision between continuing his mission or abandoning it to return to his wife. And in the most moving, gripping tale of all, a small monster struggles for survival, limb by precious limb, in a monster-eat-monster world, but learns that art and creative friendship trump Oedipal revenge.

Laugh, gasp, wonder, grieve, reflect: *Jewel Box* asks what enchantment is, even as it mesmerizes you and steals your heart.

ELAINE CHIEW (September / October 2023)

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