

Journey to the Heart Stone

Catherine Raphael

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Journey to the Heart Stone goes on an imaginative adventure through an ancient, magical land.

In Catherine Raphael's rich, socially critical fantasy novel *Journey to the Heart Stone*, a woman works to restore harmony to a once-idyllic land.

In a world brought into being by a goddess, three tribes are united under matriarchal rule. They experience a long period of peace and prosperity. But then Vestor, a power-hungry usurper, kills his sister, the mother of the Minca tribe. He dispatches his army to vanquish the rival tribes. Unsettled by Vestor's plans to marry her off to a general, Vestor's niece, Cora, sets out to find the Heart Stone, oust her uncle, and become the new Mother Minca. If she succeeds, she may save the world from Vestor's reign of violence, famine, and oppression.

Though Cora's quest is followed in chronological order, the book reimagines the classical narrative framework of a hero setting out to fight injustice by telling a layered tale about human connections. In the process, it plumbs the depths of its characters' relationships, addressing links between people, tribes, and humanity and nature. Its chapters are substantial but consumable.

The book's poetic, etiological opening serves to establish its epic sweep, introducing a compelling world that's rich with varied rituals, traditions, and landscapes. Individual settings are placed in the context of a broad universe, while customs like the celebration of the autumn equinox (which includes the consumption of fish casserole and mint-infused water) are used to deepen the world building further. The careful language and evocative descriptions pair well with the included chants, songs, and incantations, the latter of which are used to interject poetry into the book's blocks of prose. Still, the characters' conversations are sometimes formal to excess.

Though the book's characterizations skew archetypal (there is a wise tribal leader, as well as a spy without scruples), they also often feature surprises. Each member of the cast has their own personality, and the book is careful to show how factors like jealousy and bad counsel steer people in the wrong directions. Cora is the best developed character: the novel focuses on her interior life, following her states of mind in critical moments, whereas Vestor is most often seen scowling and barking orders to his underlings. And a climatic battle features people's bravery in the face of insurmountable odds, leading to a poignant and satisfying ending.

Imaginative and ambitious, the fantasy novel *Journey to the Heart Stone* adventures through an ancient, magical land, conveying real-world insights along the way.

JOSEPH S. PETE (July 6, 2022)

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