



Karina

E. B. Mann

Araby Books (Nov 8, 2018)

Softcover \$9.99 (204pp)

978-1-974267-39-2

A compelling mix of New Age spiritualism and self-esteem primer, Karina overlays coming-of-age questions with magical insight.

E. B. Mann's allegorical novel *Karina* is a heartwarming story of transformation that takes an average middle schooler from the harrowing world of adolescence to a strange new underground world that she finds behind her house. In a series of journeys between worlds, Karina discovers something profound about herself and integrates that knowledge in a way that changes everything.

It's 1999, and eighth-grader Karina Morgan is just trying to navigate daily life. Whether she's dodging her younger brothers' fisticuffs or sitting in classes thick with body odor and bad breath, she feels like she's losing.

Her "fondest obsession," Parker Anderson, doesn't seem to notice her, and her wild best friend, Mary Blair, seems content to pick up and put down their friendship at will. Overlying it all is Karina's sense that she's fatally flawed because of a facial scar she got when she was learning to walk.

Already burdened with self-doubt, Karina begins to spiral when she's targeted by Avery, leader of the Beautiful Bitches. All Karina knows is that she's had enough with not being good enough. Running through the woods behind her house, she finds "an improbable door in an improbable place." Much to her surprise, the knob turns, and she goes deep underground, straight into the heart of something much bigger yet precisely the size of herself.

Guided by Algernon, the strange being who dwells in this underground cave, Karina learns to value and trust her own senses, both internal and external. As she grapples with achieving self-knowledge, she finds she also gains insight into the people and circumstances around her.

Familiar patterns and family dramas are revealed in a new light as Karina learns to look beyond surfaces and see the older truths shaping these people's relationships. As she awakens to her own inner being, she develops a spiritual understanding of the world predicated on equal parts reincarnation, crystal magic, and Jungian psychoanalysis.

While many aspects of Karina's coming-of-age journey remain perennial, the novel takes place in the near past, just on the brink of Y2K. This choice may have a place in the current wave of '90s nostalgia, but there's also a slight remove inherent in certain details of Karina's narrative.

From the '90s pop culture references to the structure of teen relationships in a world without social media to the latent sexism within her family, several issues baked into the novel's context and setting only illustrate the distance between Karina's world and the present moment. As such, the novel occupies a difficult space: too recent to benefit from the hazy gaze of historical fiction yet too far in the past to escape seeming dated in its cultural landscape.

A compelling mix of New Age spiritualism and self-esteem primer, *Karina* overlays coming-of-age questions with magical insight in a parable about growing into your best self.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (April 19, 2018)

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