



★ King of Joy

Richard Chiem

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Richard Chiem's *King of Joy* traces an abandoned girl's tragic trajectory from unloved teenager to abandoned bride to snuff porn queen. This experimental literary novel is the right amount of both dreamy and dark.

Corvus, limp and poisonous as a human cigarette, is at the end of her rope. She exists in a creative, hysterical subculture that's one party after another, stuffed into "an empty Olympic-size swimming pool, filled with mostly half-naked bodies, awash in fog, perspiration, and more neon flashes." Of course, it can't last.

Corvus, staged by her playwright husband Perry, achieves cult status. When she loses him, Corvus goes from grey to black. She drifts through the underworld of bespoke pornography, where she meets Tim, her new director, and her co-star Amber, who's a golden foil to her permanent midnight.

The novel is lush, packed with jarring details, and surprisingly tender. Corvus—who seems doomed to circle the drain—instead revisits images, dialogue, and objects that link her past to her present.

Although sex and porn drive the plot, Chiem chooses to leave the act itself offstage; this puts the novel's focus where it belongs and intensifies the characters' connections. In *King of Joy*, everyone is either an actor or a voyeur, including the reader. Chiem's command of perspective is excellent, and each sensory detail feels like a nail on the skin.

The novel is enticingly bitter at times, juxtaposing sharp images against pastel-sentimental landscapes. As Corvus trails Tim down a flight of stairs, she notes the tiny tattoo on the back of his neck: "MOM." The balance of acid and sweet is *King of Joy's* strength. Corvus's relationship with Perry, in particular, is unexpectedly moving, natural, and tender.

King of Joy is a delicious, demonic novel that fades through adjacent, looping worlds in the magical early 2000s. Chiem evokes a lost decade and suggests the shape of the monsters that churned beneath its surface.

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