

Life Sciences

Joy Sorman

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A young woman struggles with an inexplicable malady and the weight of her family history in Joy Sorman's novel *Life Sciences*.

Ninon has always known about the family curse: every eldest daughter will at some point be stricken by a random, life-altering malady. She spends her childhood waiting, eagerly at times, to find out how the curse will manifest in her. When it finally happens, the affliction becomes Ninon's entire world, plunging her into despair. She also develops strange resilience that may change her life far more than her illness does.

As doctor after doctor fails to help her, Ninon resorts to more extreme measures in her search for an answer. She turns to self-harm, shamanism, music, and drugs: anything that promises to distract her from her fate. As her medical horizons expand, the rest of her world contracts. The internet becomes her only window to the outside world, despite her friends' concerns and her mother's regretful yet self-serving attempts to reconnect with her.

Through it all, Ninon suffers the psychological toll of constant pain, of endless medical examinations that never do any good, and of having a condition so strange and stubborn that it becomes "a part-time occupation" unto itself. Her stream-of-consciousness narration has an otherworldly effect, much like the altered states in which she finds fleeting relief.

Despite the fantastical framing, the story of Ninon and her "cursed" ancestors is all too grounded. It's an often dark tale about women who struggle with health issues that the medical establishment cannot—or does not want to—cure, or even identify. But stories can be changed, and Ninon might just be the woman to do it.

Life Sciences is an immersive, harrowing novel about the power of stories to turn a captivating fable into a prophecy.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (September / October 2021)

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