

★ **Lioness**

Mark Powell

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Mark Powell's *Lioness* is a haunting literary thriller that probes an emotional and spiritual quest for meaning amid despair.

Two years after the death of their seven-year-old son, David learns that his estranged wife, Mara, is suspected of ecoterrorism at the Appalachian water bottling plant that she blames for their son's cancer. An injured mutual friend, Chris, is arrested at the scene; Mara vanishes in the explosion.

As David pieces together what happened, he traces his and Mara's history, from their early days as activists alongside Chris, through to their estrangement and reunions, and Mara's affair with Chris. In the process, he uncovers Mara's secrets, aches, and obsessions, which made her into a talented artist and ultimately fed her extremism. He discovers strangers in his wife's life that he never knew about and realizes that much about their life together wasn't quite as it seemed. Unable to accept Mara's presumed death, David imagines an alternative outcome.

The story is fascinating, perplexing, and unsettling. It is the portrait of troubled individuals and families, each wrestling with the conflicts between their hopes and the realities that crush their spirits. As they search for meaning, their illusions propel them in surprising directions.

Powerful and layered, this is a tour de force that circles back with hindsight, adding bright details that show how people's actions were shaped by loss and passion. Its metaphors, symbols, and descriptions make it dark, moody, and mesmerizing as it raises questions about agency and truth, and as it shows the marginal distinctions between what's rational and irrational, between assumption and deceit, and between progress and environmental degradation.

Lioness is an immersive, psychologically tense novel that mines the depths of grief and illusion.

WENDY HINMAN (March / April 2022)

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