



M-Theory

Tiffany Cates

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The Chicago transit system is the nexus of two seemingly unconnected murders in Tiffany Cates's unsettling, satisfying novel *M-Theory*.

Donovan rides the train every day, taking note of the different people whom he sees on a regular basis. One day, he begins seeing a woman in a blue coat, Emily (called M by those close to her). He can't get her off of his mind. The two soon start a relationship that may be just a step up from strangers on a train—or, as Donovan hopes, something much more intimate.

But Donovan isn't the only one M has made an impression on during her daily commute. An artist with a generous spirit and a need for connection, M has befriended a number of passengers and transit workers. She searches for meaning in her life, which is marked by a lonely marriage and uncertainty about the future. When a boy M knows is murdered, and M is found dead shortly after, it falls to a detective to put the pieces together and find out how the cases connect.

Alternating between characters, as well as between the past and the present, *M-Theory* is a thrill ride that is never quite what it seems. Its events and characters converge in surprising, unsettling ways, illuminating a spider's web of interdependence that leads to violence.

As each character deepens, it becomes obvious that no one is truly good or bad; instead, they are all complex and human. Their motivations and actions ring true based on their pasts and personalities, yet there is still plenty of mystery surrounding what they will do next. The climax brings all of the novel's threads together in a way that is satisfying, but that still leaves room for interpretation. *M-Theory* is a tension-filled novel that provides no easy answers.

ANGELA MCQUAY (March / April 2021)

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