

## ★ **Magician**

**Tracy Lynne Oliver**

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Tracy Lynne Oliver's vibrant, wrenching, and fantastical horror novel *Magician* follows the coming-of-age of a gifted boy born and raised in the absence of love and light.

The magician's mother grew up steeped in hate, educated in vile seductions by a mother who knew how to manipulate her beauty to get what she wanted. Though she tried to rid herself of her pregnancy through violence, the magician made it into the world nonetheless. His childhood was still shaped by his mother's sadistic ire, though, its privations and abuses so sharp that intangible qualities became akin to objects, among which the magician was "a plant she didn't want to allow to grow."

The magician survived into adulthood by finding wonders in minutiae and by holding evil back by nurturing his innate kindness, which pulsed even in the absence of nearby human examples. He also benefited from the occasional deployment of a gift discovered in the cradle, by which "his monster [bent] the world to his needs"—warming him with scarves, delivering him baubles, even animating dust and dirt to form semblances of friends. After escaping his mother, he found temporary respite in networks of older women, then carnival life, and then love, though the darkness of his youth remained prone to creeping in to ruin each fragile instance of happiness.

Narrated in disquieting prose poetry, the book is made up of haunting partial sentences, their syntax twisted and their implications often brutal. There is intentional nonmusicality to their shrieking internal rhymes too, mimicking the discordance of the boy magician's life, which is marked by "dreams dust-fire in his throat burning crisp his water prayers" and encounters with defender-bees, sentient forests, and lunar-evocative-orb-traveling performers.

Among the welcoming carnival folk, the magician is told "we are but storybooks"; he is also mentored by a man whose tricks are sleight of hand as opposed to his actual, terrifying magic. Throughout, he and those closest to him are rendered archetypal, denied first names, destined always to be strange. All culminates in a reckoning that forces the magician to decide how his future will continue to be informed by, or become untethered from, his past.

Horrors hum behind instances of impossible beauty in *Magician*, a weird and wonderful novel about the alchemistic power of cultivating decency in defiance of cruelty.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (July / August 2026)

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