



New Animal

Ella Baxter

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A piercing novel about death, grief, and the lengths people will go to escape them, Ella Baxter's *New Animal* is not for the faint of heart.

Amelia, a cosmetic mortician with her family's mortuary business, is a clinical woman who smothers her desire for an authentic connection with meaningless sexual encounters. It's a coping mechanism she's well aware of, if unconcerned by. Emotions elude her, especially her own; she haunts dating apps to feed her steady stream of one-night stands.

Though living people are a tedious puzzle, Amelia approaches the dead with tenderness: "There are hours in which all I do is map a whole person out." Likewise, she reflects on death as a beautiful, necessary element of life—"life rests like a layer of chiffon over a body: one puff of wind and you're dead." She cannot extend such compassion and acceptance to herself and her own grief; a local tragedy still weighs on her in vulnerable moments.

With the sudden death of her mother, the last strings holding Amelia together snap. She flees to Tasmania to stay with her biological father. Trying to outrun her grief, she turns, again, to sex. One of her encounters draws her into the local BDSM community. It's a turning point fraught with confusion and fear, but out of which she carves salvation.

Baxter's prose is a living thing, wild and snarling, its jagged claws and honed teeth unforgiving and relentless. Amelia stokes empathy as a woman seeking absolution down dead ends. Her codependency and repression are addressed in frank terms—"Other people have always been the canary in the mine for me"—and every beat of dark comedy is paired with an empathetic wince as Amelia forces herself past her limits. *New Animal* is at turns graphic, disturbing, and tender—in other words: human.

DANIELLE BALLANTYNE (January / February 2022)

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