

★ **Phalaina**

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Phalaina is an enchanting dark fairy tale focused on an ethereal, red-eyed girl who may not be human.

Manon is a little girl when she appears, alone in the woods, in late nineteenth-century England. Although she is free and happy, she is in danger. Her father was killed in an accident, and two men with nefarious intentions are looking for her. She is rescued by a flurry of butterflies who bind her in a cocoon. When she emerges, she is discovered by Albert, a kind man who takes her home to the care of his wife.

But even with Albert, Manon is at risk: rumors swirl, and Jack the Ripper remains at large. Further, the adults whom Manon encounters don't know quite what to make of her. Some think that she is an abandoned albino, and the nuns to whom she is entrusted suspect that she is the devil's spawn. An evil scientist sees her as a lab specimen who's waiting to be split open for study, and her aunt wants her dead for her inheritance.

This unusual story unfolds in short chapters told from various points of view, including those of Manon; her father, Professor Humphrey, a scientist who corresponded with Charles Darwin about the discovery of a superior civilization of moth-like creatures; an illiterate poetess, Molly, who took Manon in; a lab rat; and a dog, Giulio. Flashes of horrific violence and grisly descriptions of cadavers are countered by whimsical passages and humor as the truth of Manon's existence is gradually revealed.

With its attentions to the natural world and to the menaces of humanity, *Phalaina* is a luminous ecofable wrapped in an immersive, propulsive tale.

SUZANNE KAMATA (September / October 2022)

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