



★ **Piranesi**

Susanna Clarke

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In Susanna Clarke's wondrous and moving novel *Piranesi*, a gentle man finds the tranquility of his vast but bounded world challenged by visitors from the outside.

Piranesi lives in a house whose halls seem endless. He's been close to alone for as long as he can remember: the bones of a few who came before him rest in a hall nearby, and he visits them to pay his respects. Crumbling statues—of fauns, and kings, and women crowned with coral—rest everywhere, hinting at before. The Other shows up now and then, but he's too concentrated on his search for lost truth to be perfect company. Birds arrive and leave, sometimes seeming to deliver messages in the patterns of their flight, and in where they choose to alight; the fish of the submerged lower floors provide Piranesi sustenance, as do the rains that fall from the upper floors.

Piranesi introduces this strange, perilous, and often lovely world in the soft, awed tones of a willing acolyte; he's learned to track the tides, and he trusts the house's benevolence. But there are hints that not all is right with Piranesi's world, including: that it's replete with evidence of life beyond it; that Piranesi himself is quite sure that "Piranesi" is not his real name; that pages are missing from Piranesi's journals; and that the Other's warnings against interacting with new arrivals are suspect.

As new faces appear in Piranesi's halls and a convergence of tides approaches, he starts to piece together hints of what came before his journals began: of a community of occultists who believed they could enter other worlds; of an abusive academic whose dabbling in dark arts cost unsuspecting people their lives; and of his own previous life. Piranesi treasures his vast but lonely world; he's circumspect when it comes to change. But he is kind, and there are others to consider.

Empathy opens new horizons in Susanna Clarke's glorious new novel about occultists, lost ages, and the power of belief.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (November / December 2020)

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