

Speculation

Nisi Shawl

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In Nisi Shawl's novel *Speculation*, wish-granting spectacles give a girl great power—and an even greater burden.

In 1962, Winna's life is upended when she inherits a pair of spectacles with a magical quirk: they can grant sight-based wishes that are made in the form of a speculative “what-if” question. However, when Winna's wish to see ghosts puts her in contact with the spirits of her ancestors, she learns that a curse has been plaguing her family for almost a century. If Winna hopes to save her ailing mother from the Burden of the Coles, she must use the glasses' power to reunite a long-lost relative with the specter of his own mother.

On her quest, Winna enlists the help of her bullish, wannabe detective cousin and heeds the guidance of her grandfather, a contemporary sage of the ancient magic that powers her glasses. The magical system intersects with Winna's Blackness in thoughtful ways: the more she learns about her history from her grandfather's stories, the easier it becomes to understand and wield the newfound magic.

Winna sees people in somewhat simple terms because of her age, but the characters are also deep in a way that precludes easy classification. Still, the greatest empathy in the novel is reserved for Winna herself. The book maintains a grounded perspective, showing the consequences of laying such a heavy responsibility on the shoulders of a girl. Throughout her search, Winna's failings (emotional frustrations and inconsistencies that compose the lived experience of a child) are recognized, validated, and articulated in beautiful, poetic prose that remains in the vocabulary of a young person.

Speculation is an empathetic and intriguing fantasy novel about magical powers and human weaknesses.

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