

The Book of Etta

Meg Elison

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This is a layered dystopia—feminist, violent, and blunt, it will engross its readerships.

There are hints that women in the time before the plague had choices, but Etta of Nowhere—who goes by Eddy when she's on the road scavenging—cannot imagine such a world. In the world that she knows, gender only enslaves you, turning you either into a commodity or a monster.

Rejecting possibilities of domesticity in her seemingly safe community, Eddy takes to the road often, eager to rescue the women and girls in the burnt-out towns he travels through. He has particular interest in freeing those enslaved in Estiel, the former St. Louis, under the dictatorial Lion—a man who “climbed to the top using women as stairs.” But working to undermine the vicious system that regards women as things will compromise all of Eddy's hard-won convictions.

Elison's novel is both bleak and rich, presenting wide and intricate variations of social systems that regard women as a resource. The Lion's violence is rendered in brutal prose, and the ease with which need can turn to villainy is examined in stark and heartbreaking terms. “There is no such thing as safe wanting,” Eddy warns a man from Nowhere: “Desire turns to chains faster than you can breathe.” As Eddy and Etta—one and yet separate—work across broken landscapes from the midwest to New York, they test boundaries: of gender identification, of freedom, and of concepts of right and wrong.

Elison's is a layered dystopia. Feminist, violent, blunt, and disturbing, it remains as aware of the human capacity for folly as it seems convinced that base instincts can be risen above. Survival sometimes requires breaking all the rules—a lesson Etta learns in a slow and painful way, and that will stick with engrossed readerships long after.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (February 9, 2017)

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