

The Book of X

Sarah Rose Etter

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A literary foray into the macabre madness of womanhood, Sarah Rose Etter's *The Book of X* captures the innocent joys and creeping horrors of a young girl's trek into adulthood.

Chapters are organized in short vignettes, offering the intimacy of a clandestine peek into the diary of Cassie, the third generation of women in her family to be born with their stomachs in a literal knot. "Picture three women with their torsos twisted like thick pieces of rope with a single hitch in the center," reads the second sentence, cracking the spine on a world where knees are scraped and hearts are broken alongside fields of throats, jealousy removal shops, and birthday cakes replaced with heaping helpings of granite. Even the family home sits adjacent to a meat quarry, where Cassie's father and brother harvest meat from veins underground to sell in town to the highest bidder.

Though the novel's setting is at times fantastical, the trials of its characters are rooted in familiar realities. Cassie faces bullying, body image issues, a disappointing move to a lonely city, the drudgery of office work, and a parade of heartbreak. Following many of these darker recountings are "Vision" chapters that provide an alternative, wistful version of events and add a dreamy depth to Cassie's otherwise bleak reality.

As Cassie grows older, her imaginings grow more nightmarish. Tangible problems—ailing parents, fading friendships, a longing for motherhood—keep the novel grounded even as Cassie's mind begins to fray at its strained edges. Small collections of facts are set on separate pages throughout, commenting on everything from the amount of blood released during the average menstrual cycle to the root of the word "bomb." These call back to Cassie's hunger for knowledge in her school days and provide a reminder of the novel's real-world setting.

With poetic prose and haunting honesty, *The Book of X* cuts clean to the tangled heart of femininity, unwinding one woman's story to reflect a familiar self.

DANIELLE BALLANTYNE (July/August 2019)

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