



The Butchers' Blessing

Ruth Gilligan

Tin House (Nov 10, 2020)

Hardcover \$25.95 (312pp)

978-1-947793-78-1

In Ruth Gilligan's rich historical drama *The Butchers' Blessing*, ancient traditions clash with the forces of modernity.

In the 1990s, Una is the daughter of a Butcher, one of eight men who tours the Irish countryside, catering to believers who hope to avoid an ancient curse. The Butchers are clandestine; they travel most of the year, butchering cattle as part of a secret, inherited tradition. Una is determined to be the first woman Butcher.

Una's story is intertwined with her mother Gra's. Gra misses her husband, but falls for a photographer who arrives to capture images of the Butchers. Meanwhile, Una's Aunt Lena left her family; she did not believe in the ancient traditions, and she chose not to marry a Butcher. Twenty plus years later, Lena fights a brain tumor; her husband, Fionn, struggles to make ends meet, and her son, Davey, questions his sexual orientation.

Jumping between periods, the novel locates stark contrasts in a country bound by history that also struggles to accept the changes from the outside world. Laws change with speed, including the decriminalization of homosexuality and the legalization of divorce. This results in a complex backdrop for the characters' struggles; each hopes to understand themselves and their place in the world. The fascinating world of the cattle industry is also a factor, with a Mad Cow Disease scare that plays into the story of the Butcher.

Written from multiple points of view, the book is populated by colorful local phrases such as "rip the piss" and "felt a total tuck." Its characters, from the gruff Butcher to a nerdy overachiever, are gritty and believable. As each hurtles toward their destiny, the tension grows; the pieces come together in a conclusion that is brutal yet redemptive.

ANGELA MCQUAY (November / December 2020)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. No fee was paid by the publisher for this review. Foreword Reviews only recommends books that we love. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.