

The Formation of Calcium

M. S. Coe

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M. S. Coe's experimental novel *The Formation of Calcium* is presented as the transcripts of tapes made by a middle-aged woman who is stuck in upstate New York with her depressed and abusive husband.

Mary Ellen is quirky and endearing—and a murderer. She gives her tapes innocuous names, like “Ten Methods to Remove Mold,” to discourage anyone who might discover them from listening to them. Her life is buffeted by a series of half-thought-out decisions and unforeseen consequences.

Mary Ellen goes to Florida, where she reinvents herself as Deedee and moves in with a wealthy friend. Circumstances cause her to reinvent herself yet again, stealing the identity of another woman, including the woman's online Vietnamese boyfriend, Thu. She takes over the criminal activity that the woman and Thu had underway. Thu comes to Florida to meet her, and the couple decides to move to Vietnam, where Mary Ellen reinvents herself yet again, as Bian, Thu's pet name for her, which means “secretive.”

Mary Ellen's voice is compelling and consistent. Within the first couple of paragraphs, her personality is established. She may be uneducated, but she's a smart woman, as evidenced by her astute observations, occasional philosophizing, and quick thinking to get herself out of a jam. Her descriptions often border on poetic: “his body was crumpled like a lawn-mown butterfly, a wing still twitching.” Masterful pacing moves her story along as, bit by bit, it becomes obvious that Mary Ellen is heading for another crisis. Then, the action ratchets up and the novel reads like a thriller as she maneuvers to save herself.

The Formation of Calcium is a dark comedy, a horror story, and the sad tale of a marginalized woman.

KAREN MULVAHILL (March / April 2023)

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