



## The Maenad's God

**Karen Michalson**

Arula Books

(418pp)

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*Mystical, lyrical, and inhabited by gods, The Maenad's God is a surprising supernatural love story.*

Karen Michalson's esoteric dark fantasy novel *The Maenad's God* bridges the gap between gods and mortals with the love story of a cynical FBI agent and an enchanting rock-and-roll wizard.

Pete, an FBI agent and a misanthrope, is sent to investigate a Hopner, a suspected mobster, at an army base outside of Boston. When he arrives, he meets the members of a rock band who have been scheduled to play for the soldiers. Then a man posing as the base's commander is murdered and his corpse turns to dust.

As the mystery surrounding the crime evolves and grows weirder, Pete grows closer to Jade, an intriguing member of the band. But Jade is more than a cool rocker: he's the son of the god Dionysus, whose involvement in these ministrations runs deeper than Pete can imagine. As Pete searches for answers in the case of the disintegrating corpse and dives into studying mysticism and mythology, his work and personal lives grate against each other.

The book's exponential eccentricity is captivating: it moves between mystery elements, those of magical realism, and a dark moodiness. Intriguing oddities arise, helping to maintain its internal consistency, even as people's identities change in fantastical ways. The story is set in 1992, and the decade's attitudes toward drugs, music, and the government ground the tale, in which the alluring world of rock music is centered via parties that Pete enters to be with Jade.

Pete's snarky, misanthropic attitude is another source of internal consistency. He learns about otherworldly realities, but his observations remain his own, both rich and humorous. But he describes his inner and outer worlds in intimate detail, often overexplaining what he sees, hears, and thinks: "I was an English major, boss. I love irrelevancies." Because his style of narration is sometimes bloated, the story just inches along. Many chapters pass before the book's action erupts, and major events are infrequent even then. Still, the prose is atmospheric and hypnotizing, and it proffers moving moments, as when Pete kisses Jade, "worshipping the place the [adoring] words came from."

Pete also indulges in, and observes, meandering conversations with band members, partygoers, coworkers, and suspects in his investigation. The people around him brim with personality, though. Jade exhibits ethereal kindness, and the band's promoter is goofy and oblivious. But in spite of the transformative nature of his love story, Pete remains a cynic through to the book's end, even as Jade opens his eyes to the magical potential of hope.

Sometimes contradictory but ultimately rewarding, *The Maenad's God* is a mysterious supernatural love story told in a nontraditional narrative style.

AIMEE JODOIN (October 11, 2022)

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