

The Murmurs

Michael J. Malone

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In Michael J. Malone's supernatural thriller *The Murmurs*, a hidden family history in the Scottish Highlands carries a terrible cost.

A drowning and a suicide shatter the childhoods of Annie and her twin brother Lewis. Annie loses most of her memories. She becomes haunted by frightening premonitions of people's deaths; she hears low, persistent voices and sees gory images of people's faces. These "murmurs" pull her toward an ancestral past of violence and murder in the Scottish Highlands. Meanwhile, present-day dangers loom all around her.

Annie isolates herself as a way of avoiding the terrible futures she sees, and Lewis continues searching their family's traumatic heritage for answers. The twins' resistance to the supernatural murmurs braids with a parallel, shadow tale of women in the era of witch burnings and "the clearances," when small crofters were evicted from their land by wealthier Scots. Shifts in time and in points of view help to maintain the suspense, as does the fact that each chapter ends with bits of enticing new information.

When Annie pauses her internal fight to control the murmurs, she begins to understand them as an entity within her, "long coiled, slowly relaxed. A serpent's slide into wakefulness." Such descriptions give shape to her emotions and recovered memories. She and others experience their own slow awakenings at a careful rate, lending a sense of inevitability and logic to the unspeakable acts uncovered in the book's shocking conclusion.

An insightful literary thriller about generational trauma, *The Murmurs* places a contemporary series of murders in the context of Highland history and lore.

MICHELE SHARPE (March / April 2024)

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