

★ **The Mysterious Women of J Road**

Allison Cundiff

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Southern Gothic meets feminist, supernatural horror in Allison Cundiff's thrilling novel *The Mysterious Women of J Road*, in which a gifted woman raised on the righteous side of an Ozarks divide is forced toward self-reckoning.

The women of the Missouri hill country are rich with folk knowledge. They know that you can place a sharpened ax beneath the birthing bed to speed delayed labor along; they know to hang a hornet's nest outside of your bedroom window for good luck. They know how to cure ailments, ones that baffle Western doctors, with their herbal tinctures, too. And they know not to cross over the creek to its south side, where an isolated community has become dark, strange, and ominous.

When Jess meets Lillian, one of these knowledgeable hill women, he is smitten. They marry with speed and welcome a baby despite his trepidation about the dangers of childbirth. But while Jess adores his wife, he doesn't take her magic seriously enough. On a bullfrog hunting trip near the creek, despite Lillian's warnings, he and his friends cross to the south in pursuit of their dog. They are cursed thereafter. After one dies, Lillian determines to save Jess. To do so, though, she has to cross to the south herself, risking her soul in the process.

In this unnerving, devil-shadowed tale, with its cryptids, curses, and whispers of incest, strong, generous women are the most formidable characters. Lillian is raised by a revered hill doctor, Celeste, who sacrificed her once "corseted" love to care for Lillian's mother before her. Celeste whispers prophetic warnings to Lillian before she dies, including about how the birth of her daughter, Glory Be, will "usher in the swarm."

In earlier generations, Celeste's partner, Ty, discovered "the generous bounty of power held by men, restricted to only men" while hiding in the Ozarks. Later, Lillian's mother's arrival wrecked her beloved relationship. And Lillian, who hears the internal call of the vicious ones beyond the creek, summons all the love within her to combat evil forces and protect her growing family. The novel's nonlinear structure heightens its tension; it switches between stunning revelations, inevitable deaths, and background lore to flesh out its dimensional story, leading toward a gripping ultimate showdown generations in the making.

A gorgeous tale of self-sacrifice for love runs beneath *The Mysterious Women of J Road*, a haunting, often terrifying novel that pulses with folk magic.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (July / August 2026)

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