

The Strange Inheritance of Leah Fern

Rita Zoey Chin

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A struggling empath fights her way back to life in Rita Zoey Chen's illuminating debut novel.

When she was tiny, Leah beguiled carnival-goers with animal facts—and with her ability to peek into their futures and reveal tender truths. The daughter of a charismatic magician, she was further cradled by the adoration of a bearded lady and a contortionist. They protected her from the carnival's crueller influences.

The allure of those early days dissipated when Leah's mother left her with an old friend, Edward, and never returned. Though Edward cared for Leah, doing his best to fill her aching spaces with paternal love, he could not replace the magic that her mother exuded. Truths went unspoken. When Edward died: Leah believed that she had nothing left.

But on the day that she planned to leave the world behind, Leah learned that she'd still had one observer: her reclusive neighbor, Essie. Essie's ashes are deposited unceremoniously on Leah's doorstep, along with a check and vague instructions for a good-bye quest. That spiraling trip takes Leah from the Carolinas to Canada, and from Georgia to the Arctic. Along the way, she gathers relics from Essie's bewitched past, spent among a group of fellow women artists. Essie's letters also stitch together snippets of Leah's family's truths.

Piling revelations atop otherworldly descriptions, the novel wields its uncanny enigmas in an unapologetic fashion. There are moonlit dances and incantations; there are tragic instances of love being rejected. Time unwinds to answer whispered questions, and Leah thaws thanks to the care of strangers. The girl who thought herself inaccessible to human touch finds communities in watery wilds, and she leaps for opportunities to heal.

The Strange Inheritance of Leah Fern is an enchanting novel that embraces all of the magic that the world has to offer.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September / October 2022)

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