

The Unburied Queen

Capes

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The Unburied Queen is a philosophical fantasy novel in which love and sacrifice are necessary for the interconnectivity of all.

There is one truth that reins supreme in Capes's fantasy novel *The Unburied Queen*: the island must have a heart.

Since she was old enough to wander alone, Loon has been washing her face in the pond. She and her siblings do this once a week as a royal assignment and out of respect for the island they live on. The current Heart of the Island (Loon's mother, the queen) has been peacefully submerged in the pond for fifteen years. From her, the island extracts magic and a sense of intention; through its waters and through fungus networks, it then spreads that magic to every corner and living being. After Loon finds her mother floating on top of the water, though, the island erupts into chaos. A storm inundates the land, carries away Loon's father, and sets into motion a plot to remake the very foundations of Loon's society.

The story is multilayered. On the surface is the mystery of the queen's unburial and the identity of the future Heart; beneath this are the concerns of the general public, who are subject to exploitation and who are kept ill informed. The people's fear is stoked by manipulative magic users, and there is tension between those who want to remake the world (and who will use violence to achieve their ends); those who live in service to the island (and who will do anything to ensure the continued existence of the next Heart of the Island); and those who just want to survive. In expanding and containing these narrative elements, the book becomes immersive. Its threads concerning enduring friendship, requited and unrequited love, and sacrifice are also involving.

Spanning multiple years, and incorporating multiple perspectives, this five-part narrative is directed by chapter headings featuring time orientations. But these vary in breadth: one chapter may represent multiple people on a single day; another may be singular in perspective, and cover several months. Though organized, this device is wearying. The headings also act as a storytelling shortcut, as when the romance between Loon and the future king, and the deepening friendships between characters, are helped to their maturations via time jumps.

Still, the story maintains its distinct, innovative world-within-a-world well. The island may be all that exists, but on it, each of the three cities retains its own identity, customs, and ways of interacting with others, outsiders, and the island itself. Loon, a royal from the center city, is delicate and helpful; her companion since childhood, who speaks only through sign language, is hardworking. Loon's king, from the fertile city, is keen and knowledgeable in the ways of life cycles; and the oracle, from the city of order, is intelligent, subtle, and Machiavellian. The sharp lines that delineate each person and city from the others bring into focus the myriad ways that different kinds of people and expressions are necessary for a functioning society overall.

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DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (January 13, 2022)

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