

★ The Waters

Bonnie Jo Campbell

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Daring women keep secrets, heal their neighbors, and protect each others' futures in Bonnie Jo Campbell's captivating novel *The Waters*.

On an island in a Michigan swamp sits a cabin whose residents seem to exist outside of time. As the farms around them shift toward modern equipment and as people move away, the islanders remain the community's medicine women. Their eldest is Herself, for whom "joy was always a grave business." She wears a shell around her neck for every woman she's saved, and she concocts cures for ailments (including unwanted pregnancy) out of herbs, tinctures, and snake venom, guided by her mother's ghost.

Herself was married once, but she sent him away. On her own, she raised three "exasperating saints": one left for her in a basket; one, her blood daughter; and one, her daughter's daughter. When the youngest girl, Rose Thorn, returns to the island with a baby whose father is a question mark, it looks like another generation will inherit Herself's techniques.

Precocious, so empathetic that she can speak to animals, and in love with math, Dorothy grows up in Herself's care, not knowing how the world turns beyond the waters. She craves her mother's company, but receives it rarely; she refuses meat and conspires to protect snakes from Herself's techniques. She learns what it is to "live so enmeshed with people in a place that you shared one another's dreams." In time, her boundless compassion leads both to undoings and to her community's healing.

With an electrifying vocabulary all its own (here, cigarettes are coffin nails, and plant names roll off of tongues with ease), *The Waters* is a novel that's rife with enchantments—a classic in the making, introducing generations of heroines who are destined to be beloved.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (January / February 2024)

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