

★ **To the Forest**

Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette

Rhonda Mullins, Translator

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A woman returns to her childhood haunts in Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette's sensual, earthy novel *To the Forest*.

Decamping their pandemic-shuttered city, a family retreats to a blue cottage in the woods—a place bound by a stream, a mountain, and tumbles of memories. In addition to foxes, moose, and a lynx, their evolving bubble includes hermits, hideaways, farmers, grandparents, and old friends. They gather herbs and raise chickens; the land becomes their teacher. They trouble the line between isolation and refuge.

There's a timeless, poetic quality to Barbeau-Lavalette's prose, whether her subject is a headstone found beneath her home (belonging to Jeanne, who "was too free"), a runaway tractor, or a multigenerational hunt for chanterelles, which appear "in the claw of light between two ferns ... never alone." As she communes with a beaver in the stream and watches her children prance in icy waters, she aches and learns to "settle where the mountains meet the sky." She revives past tales, observes her gentle husband's struggles with helpless tenderness, and is quenched by a woodsman. And as she coaxes her garden toward flourishing, she changes too; steeped in ancient ways and wild knowledge, she evolves.

Each character encountered in *To the Forest* becomes beloved, including an aging aunt whose memory slips as the shutdown stretches on; a German settler who, enraptured by a local and the land, formed himself to the earth, rather than attempting to tame it; and the adventure-thirsty child who the narrator once was, whose shadow appears in her children's play. Bathed in "precious boreal vanilla," whose "fragrance settles in the skin," they endure the pandemic from a distance, revitalized by the rural landscape to which they fled.

Covering a period of grief, growth, and rebirth, *To the Forest* is an exquisite novel that revels in wild places.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (July / August 2023)

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