

★ **Villager****Tom Cox**

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Amused, sometimes annoyed, and always evolving, the land beneath an English village observes the habits of the generations who settle it in Tom Cox's irresistible novel *Villager*.

The land beneath Underhill has seen it all: pagan pictures painted on its stone walls; fields tilled and tamed; golf courses cultivated, sucking the water away; generations carousing down its twisting lanes. It knows the families who have called it home for generations well, but it knows its passers-through, too. Unlike human beings, it remembers all.

The land itself is the intermittent narrator of this multigenerational tale, whose second throughline is an outsider, RJ McKendree. Underhill made an impression upon McKendree when he was young, and the memory called him back after his first band dissolved. Gathering driftwood on the beach, playing tunes in the village pub, he yearned to bottle this place—its wide skies, pixie lights, and bird trills; its water crashing on the sand—in his songs. And if the villagers' words mean anything, he succeeded: across decades, those tunes pique their sense of home.

Moving between time periods to capture changes in the town—including the impacts of a warming climate, overdevelopment, and increased dependence on AI; but also more human dramas, like handshake land deals reneged upon, friends growing apart, lasting love, and unreliable landlords—this startling, lovely, and cheeky tale contains reminders of human impermanence and vivacity. Throughout, the land knows, appreciates, and anticipates its people's movements—a generous host with a long memory:

I desire love. I want to see it thrive. But I also want blood. I want it to seep into me and do its work. I want a balance redressed.

A stretch of English seaside becomes wise to the ways of its inhabitants in *Villager*, a bewitching novel about interconnections and endurance.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March / April 2023)

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