

## ★ Cicada Summer

**Erica McKeen**

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In Erica McKeen's dazzling novel *Cicada Summer*, a young woman, her ex-lover, and her aging grandfather reckon with the aftermath of tragedy while cloistered together in a remote cabin in the Canadian wilderness.

In the summer of 2020, mid-pandemic, a heatwave settles over Eastern Canada, and a brood of cicadas emerges from deep beneath the earth. Following her mother's death, Husha moves into her grandfather's ramshackle home and becomes his caretaker. In this apocalyptic setting, the pair are soon joined by Husha's ex, Nellie, who arrives unannounced. They have another strange and alluring companion, too: a book of short stories written by Husha's mother.

In the book within a book, a marine biologist discovers a new fish whose extraordinary anatomy inexplicably alters her own. A hole opens in a family's driveway and begins to devour its surroundings. A woman grappling with infertility buries her miscarriages beneath saplings that begin to speak in their own uncanny, poetic language. The creatures in the stories are multifunctioning metaphors for grief, change, memory, trauma, and care. But they are more than metaphors, too; their singular magic comes from being rendered as living, breathing beings that slip beyond the confines of their roles as signs.

Horror blends seamlessly with surreal beauty as the characters reckon with grief, longing, and the dark gulf of memory. The language is pulsing and atmospheric, reminiscent of the eerie cadences of fairy tales or dreams. The multiple storylines and points of view are balanced with ease and delicacy. Further, each short story in Husha's mother's book informs the core narrative while maintaining its standalone integrity and impact.

Grief is less a feeling than a palpable physical presence in *Cicada Summer*, a novel whose web of interwoven stories illuminate and enlarge each other.

BELLA MOSES (May / June 2024)

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