

## Divine in Essence: Stories

### Yarrow Paisley

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*The startling and stunning short story collection Divine in Essence is about violence within families, pain, and ecstasy.*

Yarrow Paisley's spellbinding short story collection *Divine in Essence* concerns ghosts, possession, violence, sex, and death—topics handled with generous amounts of the weird and monstrous.

While the collection as a whole is cohesive, it is also divided according to themes. The first nine stories are divided into three sections, followed by one standalone story. The stories in the first section, "Divine," explore the outcomes of violence. In "The Great Event," a murderous husband turns his wife into a ghost. She first haunts his house, then evolves beyond its boundaries. In "I in the Eye," a stepmother traps her stepson in her glass eye and replaces him with a homunculus. Another tale of a mother hurting her son, and thereby dramatically changing his life, is "Your Mother Loves You."

The stories in the "In" section explore communication between the dead and the living. "The Metaphor of the Lakes" is the correspondence between a ghost, Gracie, and Mr. Scatt in a journal. In "Fever Visions," Hattie journals about seeing her mother while ill. And "Nancy & Her Man" describes a physical connection between the living Nancy and a dead man.

The stories in the "Divine" section are further explorations of violence, suffering, and pleasure. "Icarus in Bardot" is a collection of letters from Icarus to Brigitte Bardot. In "Mary Alice in the Mirror," the titular spirit communicates with several generations of people who encounter the object she is trapped in. The story "Rocking Horse Traffic" is also about violence within a family. Finally, the last story in the collection, "The Life of Cherry," is mythic, covering maternal violence. Subdivided into vignettes, its ending connects to a character introduced early in the story, but it is unwieldy in sections before that return.

The shorter pieces make a considerable impression, and those that focus on how spirits function while trapped are beautiful and resonant. Elsewhere, magic plays a pivotal role, including in relation to violence and escaped violence. As the stories become longer, though, their cores are more obscured, in part because of the introduction of elements like rambling poetic lines. Still, the prose is vivid throughout, with occult imagery making memorable impressions, as with references to grimoires and a "sensorium [that's] contemptuous of time."

Startling and stunning, the horror stories collected in *Divine in Essence* concern violence within families and the relationships between pain and ecstasy.

MARJORIE JENSEN (December 11, 2024)

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