

Dog on Fire

Terese Svoboda

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In Nebraska poet Terese Svoboda's haunting novel *Dog on Fire*, a small town reels in the wake of a tragedy.

In a dusty town in contemporary times, an unnamed man dies under mysterious circumstances. In the months that follow his loss, two women—his girlfriend, Aphra, who is disrespected in their community; and his sister, who suspects Aphra of some culpability in his death—grieve him, trying to piece together their lives, relationships, and memories in his absence. Their conflicting takes on events push the story forward.

In this curated, sprawling, nonlinear tale, the prose is directed by calculated discomfort; this is apparent in every nook and cranny of the novel. Most of the characters are without names. There are scenes of animal abuse; people see specters; and neighbors are cruel when interacting with one another. These scenes are engaging and sometimes even humorous; their lines are poetic in their sensibilities.

The story's pieces seem random at first, but they are all planted with good reason. Together, they are used to flesh out life in the women's small town, and to reveal the nature of the stories that people tell themselves after senseless tragedies change their lives forever. As the short chapters bounce between perspectives and timelines, careful, focused audiences will develop a clear understanding of their collective meaning. Through each of the uncomfortable scenes, an ultimate payoff is secured; the story is tied together in the book's dismal, but still satisfying, conclusion.

In the magical literary novel *Dog on Fire*, two different women in a small town move through a complicated grieving process.

LILY DETAEYE (March / April 2023)

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