

★ **Elixir: In the Valley at the End of Time****Kapka Kassabova**

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Kapka Kassabova's dreamy and meandering book *Elixir* covers her travels through the Mesta River region of Bulgaria in search of a cure for the pains of the human condition.

Examining its people, history, and natural beauty, this Mesta Valley-set book captures a blend of the past with the present. There, modern religion and ancient folk rituals come together, and the natural landscape offers an abundance of plants and herbs that are sought after for their medicinal properties. The mountains and waterways are home to several sacred sites too, known for healing and imparting wisdom and enlightenment.

Lush, illustrative prose vivifies this landscape, its ethereal quality highlighting the interconnectivity of ecology and humanity. Kassabova describes how people in small villages live in symbiosis with their environment, with foragers, healers, and mystics taking what they need and preserving the nature. Tourists from urban areas come in too, searching for ancient magic that will bring health and happiness and often destroying the very resources that they seek.

There is profound wisdom in this book. In a section discussing a sacred stone known as the Passage, Kassabova reflects on witnessed miracles, postulating that it is not the geography that matters so much as it is the psychology that allows people to believe in sacred places and to accept healing when they may not allow themselves the same grace in other circumstances. Though she does not state outright what the "elixir" is, the narrative makes it clear that it is not something external to human beings, but rather something that makes humanity, both individually and collectively, whole.

*Elixir* is the vibrant, beautiful story of a singular, remarkable place. It issues a call to reclaim the physical, emotional, and spiritual connection between humanity and the natural world.

CATHERINE THURESON (May / June 2023)

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