

## Journey to Merveilleux City

**Stephanie Barbé Hammer**

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*In the unforgettable mystery novel Journey to Merveilleux City, secrets are uncovered and epiphanies are reached in the course of a singular journey.*

In Stephanie Barbé Hammer's novel *Journey to Merveilleux City*, strangers on a train become embroiled in a web of lies and intrigue.

The train ride to Merveilleux City, Québec, should have been routine. But then Mack, a biracial bagpiper who's smarting from a bad breakup, tries to help Allison, a goth girl who may or may not be part octopus, find an old man who may or may not be a drug-induced hallucination. Meanwhile, a middle-aged poet, Diamond, debates the merits of her illicit relationship with her mentor, and a Chinese vlogger, May-Bel, records the proceedings—and, potentially, important clues—for all the world to see. None of these four passengers will ever forget the secrets uncovered and the epiphanies reached on this singular journey.

The prose adapts to fit each narrator's personality: Mack's voice is rambling and includes tangents about his late father and old movies; Diamond's is filled with clipped, controlled sentiments about her troubled personal and professional lives. Other outlandish characters—including an evangelical cowboy, a presidential daughter lookalike, and a soap-star-turned-medic-turned-politician—are entertaining in their own rights, filling out the offbeat yet treacherous atmosphere that Mack, Allison, and May-Bel navigate as the investigation deepens. However, the book's text messages and PowerPoint slides are often so small that their text is difficult to read.

Most of the action takes place on an old-fashioned train, a classic backdrop that is here updated in thoughtful and interesting ways. The space has limited hiding places for those in search of protection or escape. At the same time, it results in a sense of urgency: Mack and Allison have only so long to get to the truth before the train stops and all of their clues and suspects scatter forever.

The story doubles as both a fun mystery and a sharp commentary on race, immigration policy, and American politics, with the various characters sometimes falling prey to bigotry and sometimes manipulating it to their advantage. An unexpected death adds a sense of danger to the characters' quest and gives May-Bel a chance to shine. And the team's clever machinations allow Allison's elderly friend, who harbors a surprising and noble secret, to escape those who would stop him. Some elements—including the cowboy's relationship to a boy and the explanation behind Allison's cephalopod nature—are amorphous, though the book's conclusion is satisfying, sweet, and surprising.

*Journey to Merveilleux City* is a quirky, engaging mystery novel about the risks and rewards of opening yourself up to new people and experiences. A hilarious coda wraps up this charming story about how people are rarely what they appear to be.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (October 17, 2023)

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