



Masquerade

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An enigmatic discovery is the impetus for a faltering man to rethink an old friendship and a recent, raw breakup in the sinuous, surprising novel *Masquerade*.

Once, Meadow planned to become a doctor in the humanities; now, he works at a bar. After growing up between the rural US and Shanghai, he feels rootless. His friends anchor him, but they keep disappearing, too—one into a committed relationship, another to a gallery in Oregon.

Charismatic Selma is Meadow's recent constant—an artist whose work both shocks and enraptures him, an “organism that [keeps] evolving for the pure pleasure of transformation.” She's given him her apartment rent free for the summer, affording him space to recalibrate. But when Meadow finds an aged, unknown book in a drawer, and when Selma disappears in Shanghai just after, he begins to wonder just how much of what he knows of their lives is true.

“We use stories to make sense of the senseless,” the book notes. Selma, before vanishing, tells Meadow that he lands himself in the same story on repeat, alluding that he prefers heartbreak to constancy. But as he delves into her book—a 1940s work of magical realism directed by subterfuge at a decadent party—Meadow begins to wonder if Selma hasn't been the one writing his tale, shaping it as the latest piece in the performance art of her life.

Truth is a malleable concept in this intoxicating novel, wherein mirror surfaces morph to pull people in and masked figures deliver explosive secrets in whispers at parties. A Cape Cod mushroom trip results in potential revelations, and a trusted relationship is exposed as a possible act. Meadow lopes and lurches toward rebirth, or at least a recentering, in the book's electric last portions, making *Masquerade* a novel of illusions and warped reflections worth getting lost in.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (November / December 2024)

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