



Ring: A Novel

Michelle Lerner

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Somber and emphatic, Ring is a novel about a parent learning to navigate their grief in a landscape that reminds them of infinite loss.

In Michelle Lerner's novel *Ring*, a parent, mourning the loss of their child, contemplates ending their own life in the Canadian wilderness.

The body of Lee's only child, Rachel, was found in the desert; Rachel had been volunteering to drive food and help to migrants. Estranged from their wife, Susan, Lee is consumed by grief. They seek out a means to die by way of the Seven Pillars Society, a sanctuary and private colony near Attawapiskat that empowers individuals to meditate, train, and make an optional trek into the snow.

In Canada, Lee meets others training for the walk. They also develop an unexpected bond with another member's dog, Ring. As Lee continues living and training under Catherine and Samu, members of the Seven Pillars Society staff, they find that the solution to their grief is not as straightforward as they had hoped.

Lee is a fascinating, imperfect hero who's prone to mistakes. They ask blunt questions of others and often don't take others' emotions into consideration. In time, though, Lee is shown what they're doing and how it could hurt someone. Their all-encompassing grief, which wore them down bit by bit, is also shown in examples small and large, from Lee no longer being afraid of flying to a heartrending inner monologue:

Though I'd lived through many days since my daughter died, I couldn't admit they were of the same nature as when she was alive ... The days seemed to pass through me rather than the other way around.

While the routine at the sanctuary leads to some repetitiveness, interest is maintained thanks to Lee's fresh conversations with others, to revelations regarding Lee and their memories with Rachel, and to the deepening bond between Lee and Ring. Indeed, the story follows the trajectory of Lee's mental state well: At the beginning of the book, the prose is saturated in melancholy, marked by numbness, detachment, and severe depression, but as Lee begins training and even perhaps healing, the prose becomes sharp and awash with feeling.

In spite of Lee's centered suffering, the book is expansive because of its somber recognition of the suffering experienced by people all around them. Indeed, hefty external issues are evident in the Canadian landscape, including issues around climate change, colonization, and the treatment of Indigenous populations. Nonetheless, the book works toward catharsis as Lee gets farther into their training for the snow walk. Their character arc is not a smooth curve: It wobbles, regresses, and fights as they begin to find joy, camaraderie, and love.

Ring is a breathtaking novel that muses through the complications of grief via a parent learning how to live through it.

NATALIE WOLLENZIEN (December 10, 2024)

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