

★ **Smothermoss: A Novel**

Alisa Alering

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Alisa Alering's alluring novel *Smothermoss* enters the bloodstream of Appalachian storytelling like a fevered dream, unraveling the intergenerational tales of women living on the edge.

Half-sisters born five years apart, Sheila and Angie live in a mountain cabin with their hardworking mother and their aging family matriarch. Angie prepares herself for mushroom clouds and Russian invasions, drawing evocative images on scrying cards; at twelve, she aches to fit in. And Sheila tends to the rabbits that feed her family, feels choked by the memory of childhood violence, and denies herself most of what she hungers for. As Angie practices fighting in the woods, Sheila's starving body grows weaker; as Angie patches together ideas of what sex might look like, Sheila dreams of resting her head on the shoulder of an appealing classmate, Juanita.

The girls' home life shifts when two backpackers are murdered on the nearby Appalachian Trail, igniting fear in the local community. As "the rabbit women's blood-cry works its slow way into the mountain's core," Sheila fights to understand what ties her to this land and its women—and which threads she might sever. Meanwhile, Angie plunges into the underbrush, determined to catch the killer on her own.

Enchanting, haunting images pervade the tale: of bloodspotted eyes that see hidden truths; of gold lines coursing through quartz and temporary cracks in mountain shale big enough to slip a girl's body through. Rabbits take on mystical qualities, hopping through nightmare and redemption scenes alike; Angie's cards take on a life of their own. But even as the dangers multiply, it comes to seem as though there's nothing these women can't overcome.

Smothermoss is a glorious Southern Gothic novel that celebrates women's innate, powerful magic.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (July / August 2024)

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