

★ **The Blue Maiden****Anna Noyes**

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A novel about sisterhood, witch hunts, common cruelties, and survival, Anna Noyes's *The Blue Maiden* pulses with earthy magic.

"They attacked me": it's a faint admission breathed into the cellar dark, on the night when Bea and Ulrika's childhood splinters into two parts. The cruel boys in the reeds made it impossible for the preacher's daughters to keep traipsing, barefoot and free, through the wilds with their mother's herbal grimoire as their guide. There's always someone at fault in such tragedies—here, it's not the girl who arranged hemlock into bouquets. For Bea, who longs to belong, it's a hard truth to bear.

The girls' island has a history of such cruelties toward women. Two hundred years ago, another preacher forced boys to confess that they'd been subject to witchcraft on a neighboring island, Blockula—the shadow realm of the uninhabited Blue Maiden. Twenty-five women paid the fatal price of those lies, and they haunt the islanders still. Those who are unusual—like Ulrika; like Bruna, who still practices the old magic; like Elias, who writes poems—are punished. Those who conform—even Bea, in her weakest moments—are left alone.

While jealousies, suspicions, and violence mark the novel's turns and have lasting implications for its generations, such wounds are salved, even countered, by the defiant liveliness that undergirds the sisters' island life. They preserve plums, dry herbs, and dance among the tides: "she felt radiant, leaping sure-footed from rock to rock. Colors darted inside her like fish under the surface of the shallows, shimmering pink or gold or green." These moments ground them, carrying them through dark revelations and hard tests of their bond.

Sifting through centuries of island life to reveal a splendid array of women's heirlooms—tactile and otherwise—*The Blue Maiden* is a bewitching novel.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May / June 2024)

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