



The Crooked Forest: Cloud Crazed

Joni Franks

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The Crooked Forest is a whimsical novella that promotes ecological awareness through its story of community and connection.

In Joni Franks's illustrated fantasy novella *The Crooked Forest*, searching beings take multiple routes to healing and redemption.

Willow is a mystical Shun who is separated from her mother by human incursions into the Crooked Forest. Together with her enchanted fairy dog Sir Gyzmo, Willow seeks to curtail the humans, who overstep their boundaries in nature. She also searches for clues to her mother's whereabouts.

Aidan is the human who contributed to Willow's misfortunes. He lies about his past to beautiful Wynter in order to marry her. But as the ecosystem around the couple degrades, leading to a series of droughts, Wynter realizes the extent of Aidan's deception and is heartbroken. And in a land where the forces of nature are embodied, heartbreak is almost enough to drain and kill a person.

Willow's and Wynter's paths converge as they seek healing in Crooked Forest. They hope to learn to forgive those who wronged them. They are pursuing a brighter future. By becoming attuned to the natural world and the spirits that inhabit it, both women draw closer to achieving the objectives of their quests.

The conflict between humanity and nature is evident throughout. Still, the book's instances of interpersonal conflict are muted, and with them the story's tension. Characters give one another rousing talks and speak of hope and perseverance repeatedly, but the obstacles they face are quite surmountable.

The character who experiences the most change, Wynter, transforms her life in full; others seem competent and happy no matter what, and are proclaimed heroes for their unending optimism. Further, disparate characters are sometimes conflated with one another, as with the water spirit Dewdrop who was said to have driven Aidan away from a failed irrigation project, though Willow was the one whose spirit animal, a silver wolf, emerged and was described during that confrontation.

While the prose is flowery and descriptive in places, its exposition is too dominant. It summarizes and overexplains past events to distancing effect. Still, this fairy world is complex, populated by myriad beings, ranging from alluring winged people to hideous stone trolls. Beautiful illustrations accompany many of the chapters, vivifying these whimsical fairy creatures. There are almost more elemental spirits than there are elements, hammering home the idea that it is crucial for humans to live in harmony with nature—and to pause and notice the facets of the natural world.

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JEANA JORGENSEN (August 16, 2023)

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