

The Lightning Jar

Christian Felt

University of Iowa Press (Oct 15, 2018)

Softcover \$16.00 (142pp)

978-1-60938-600-9

In Christian Felt's eerie and wondrous *The Lightning Jar*, an outwardly ordinary Swedish family's history is plumbed for its most extraordinary dreams and aspirations.

Amanda and Karl spend their summer perched on the edge of a Swedish lake with their mother. Its depths are inhabited by pretty monsters; its waters have had the smell lightning-zapped right out of them. A wished-for troop of cousins arrives, setting off a string of increasingly uncanny adventures.

Their great-grandmother, Astrid, is a background figure in their tale, as are her mysterious, near-forgotten relations. She returns in the story of one of her grandchildren, whose parents defied conventions by marrying across religious barriers, as well as in her own childhood lakeside story. One of her progeny, Mons, communes with pond creatures and dreams of the Morra, who turns living beings into glass.

Gypsies and ghosts, colors and sounds, forests and dances: they all twirl together in this lonely, lively book. Animals talk and mythical beings linger. Jam becomes rubies; children become lightning and ghosts.

Vintage impressions of wimples and queens are counteracted by mentions of contemporary delights, from stegosaurus toys to Cheetos and Taylor Swift. This reality is both grounded and aloof, luring attention in much the same way that the lake's Wisps seduce wanderers into their realm. Some of the similes are downright disturbing, others are simply lovely.

Though its stories within stories have linear lines, *The Lightning Jar* less asks to be followed than acquiesced to; its pages twinge all of the magical chords that childhood fairy tales do, asking questions whose power lies in their audaciousness, not in their answers:

What if, as an old man, I learned that a dragon had been living inside the Mountain all along? Would I have any stories that didn't change?

Its children are both vivified by their family members and left lonesome even in communion. *The Lightning Jar* is equally melancholy and spectral as it traipses through childhood days.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (University Press 2018)

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