

The Oracle of Cumae

Melissa Hardy

Second Story Press (Oct 8, 2019)

Softcover \$19.95 (256pp)

978-1-77260-114-5

Melissa Hardy's irreverent and funny novel *The Oracle of Cumae* is a layered tale wherein the present collides with the distant past.

Coming to the end of her life, Mariuccia calls for a priest—but not because she wants to confess her sins. She has a secret to tell. She's carried it all her life; it is older than humanity.

Mariuccia comes from a family that for generations has been the guardians of the cave of Lady Sibylla, one of the god Apollo's oracles. It is not easy to be the protectors of Lady Sibylla. The oracle is irreverent, nosy, mischievous, and she talks too much, all of which makes her incredibly funny at her work. Underscored by the fact that old people literally shrink in the novel, Lady Sibylla is the engine of the absurd humor that permeates the story.

As Mariuccia tells the priest about her life, her relationship to Lady Sibylla serves as the framework. Within it, new characters appear, telling their stories in their own words, leading to a reading experience similar to that of unpacking a Russian doll, disassembling and reassembling it to reveal new surprises within each layer.

Several threads run throughout, with the conniving Lady Sibylla at their center. A man who can't help but give people the evil eye and a lovesick bachelor whose life is turned upside down because of botched love potions are the main threads. The comedy of errors that results from the bachelor's toyed-with feelings runs out of steam, and the oracle's final attempt to get things right is quirky as a result. The man with the evil eye, however, showcases the book's absurdism fully.

As it meanders toward its climax, *The Oracle of Cumae* is entertaining and full of surprises. It's a novel that relishes in poking fun at itself and its characters.

ERIKA HARLITZ KERN (September / October 2019)

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