

★ **The Singing Forest****Judith McCormack**

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A young lawyer of shifting identities is presented with a transformative case in Judith McCormack's devastating, poetic novel *The Singing Forest*.

Even before WWII began in earnest, Belarusian citizens disappeared into the Minsk forest, where bullets pierced the still. Those not selected for silencing pretended not to see. Decades later, as bones push up from the bracken: their ruse is no longer concealment enough to save Drozd—a driver, confession taker, and worse who escaped to Canada, pretending to be a refugee. His host government has found him out, and they want him gone.

In Toronto, Leah is selected to build the case against Drozd. It's no simple proposition: many potential witnesses were murdered; others have age-hazed memories. But Leah needs to prove herself—to her boss and coworkers; and to the memories of her forebearers, whose histories have been blotted quiet, too. Though she knows that "hearsay multiplied a hundred times is still hearsay," Leah pursues Drozd's crimes with vigor, poring over "lies, half-truths, stories painted on air."

In the process of her investigation, and as her own memories begin to resurface and clear, Leah begins pronouncing her own Judaism. She does so to honor the aunt who helped to raise her, and who worked to weave Ashkenazi rhythms into her being, but also to defy the vitriol of those who have preserved old hates, whom she's looking in the face for the first time. Her mother's weaknesses, and her father's absence, take on new and significant dimensions, too.

Through Leah, the novel interrogates the meanings, and the weight, of justice and truth. Crimes and confessions are both revealed to be mere pixels of larger stories, all of which are complicated enough to defy pat pronouncements. By its searing and ambiguous finale, this startlingly humane novel has made an indelible impression.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (November / December 2021)

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