

The Witch's Secret

Stacie Murphy

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An exiled witch contends with murderous forces in Stacie Murphy's beguiling novel *The Witch's Secret*.

In the Civil War-era, Joya, having misused her magic against the strict rules of her Boston magisterium, is sent to live with Josiah, a watchful, taciturn elder who lives in a roughshod town on the Colorado frontier. It's a setting that's full of danger, where Joya has to accept help from others to get by. Further, her arrival in the West takes a vicious turn when she and a ranger stumble on a slain couple. Joya is alarmed: she senses evil magic behind the deed. Meanwhile, the presence of Southern rebels and spies among the witches heightens the book's suspense, and when a Union patrol is murdered, Joya's suspicions increase.

The novel involves both historical and supernatural elements, and it bristles with urgency. Its gritty setting is lightened because of people's relationships with one another: Joya connects other women, including a girl with nascent magical powers; their friendships draw forth the protective facets of Joya's character. And in the course of her apprenticeship with Josiah, she learns to be more responsible with magic. There are flickerings of romance in the novel as well.

Joya was once inventive enough to combine new ways of casting spells; now, she has to rely on other means for success. Indeed, the interplay between Joya's powerful will and her now-limited abilities is fascinating. The dichotomy also spurs her to act, even as doubt reigns surrounding whether her status as a witch will ever be restored. Later, an encounter with a demon provokes questions about how far sin extends—and about whether wrong deeds can be forgiven if they prevent greater wrongs.

In the historical novel *The Witch's Secret*, a powerful woman learns to harness her strength with stunning results.

KAREN RIGBY (July / August 2024)

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