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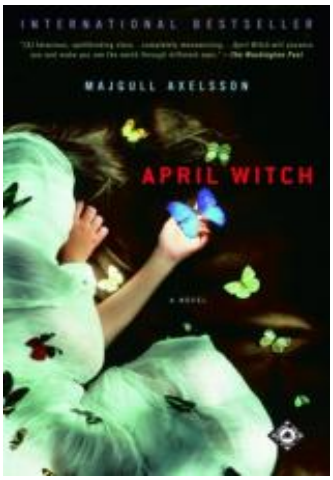
April Witch: A Novel

by Majgull Axelsson



About the Book

Desirée lies in a hospital bed thinking, dreaming. Born severely disabled, she cannot walk or talk, but she has other capabilities. Desirée is an April witch, clairvoyant and omniscient, traveling through time and space into the world denied her.

The woman who gave Desirée up at birth subsequently took in three foster daughters, who know nothing of the existence of their fourth "sister." Sensing that her own time is short, Desirée has decided that one of the others has lived the life she herself deserved. One day, each of the three women receives a mysterious letter that forces her to examine her past and her present?setting in motion a complex fugue of memory, regret, and confrontation that builds to a shattering climax.

April Witch created a furor upon its original publication in Sweden. Addressing themes of mother-daughter relationships, competition between women, and the failures of Sweden's postwar welfare state, it is foremost a thrillingly written and fascinating story.

Discussion Guide

1. How does Desirée, an invalid with no ability to move or speak, function as the conjurer of this story? Are the events actually happening, or is the narrative of Christina, Margareta, and Birgitta some kind of extended dream or death sequence? In what capacity does Hubertsson serve as the impetus of the narrative as he continues revealing facts about Desirée's past and "forcing another piece of the puzzle" on her?

2. At the novel's beginning, Desirée notes that the smallest elements of matter are simultaneously waves and particles. How does the subject of duality continue to present itself throughout the rest of April Witch, especially in relation to the characters, none of whom seem to be entirely victims or villains? How do Birgitta's first words?"Gitta not bad!"?raise a

theme of ambivalent morality?

3. Early in the text, Desirée says that while she doesn't know what form meaning takes, she knows that it exists. Compare this need for belief to Margareta's Christmas desire to go to Midnight Mass and her conviction that God is gravity. Where else do the novel's characters search for meaning?

4. Sex is an integral part of the narrative. Christina thinks that virginity at an older age makes her "defective" and breaks her own hymen; Margareta has an affair with a teacher and then goes on to sleep with strangers; Birgitta is "chosen" by Hound Dog and works the streets of Salt Flats. What is the meaning of sex and sexuality for these three characters?

5. Discuss the significance of the cherry tree photo. How do the girls' locations in the tree and the incorrectly recorded colors of their dresses seem to set them in fixed positions in relationship to one another? How have these positions changed by the book's end?

6. How do the rape and slow death of Tiger-Maria serve as a metaphor for the manner in which the disabled are treated in the Swedish health care system? Desirée eventually concludes that "none of my sisters stole the life that was meant for me. I have lived the life that was meant for me." With so many members of the medical profession?like Redelius and Zimmerman?undervaluing her existence, how does Desirée define life?

7. Memory plays a key role in the novel. At one point, Margareta notes that "you weren't supposed to talk about the specters. They'd go away if you just ignored them. They'd be all gone by the time the future arrived." How are the girls chased by the specters of their pasts? Is Margareta less haunted because she never knew her mother? How does Christina's creation of the Post-Industrial Paradise and the impression it gives "as if the twentieth century never happened" fulfill a need to create a new heritage and bury her past?

8. At one point, Desirée declares that Ella "should've realized she had obligations to fulfill, she should have been able to recall that I was her child and that I was also a human being, underneath all of my disabilities." Is Ella to blame for Desirée's treatment? Discuss any possible irony concerning the fact that Desirée's name means "the desired one."

9. After arriving at Aunt Ella's, Birgitta realizes "that there was something sacred about food in this house." How does eating take on a ritualistic nature for Ella? How is this connected to her past? Discuss Christina's need to re-create the entire traditional Christmas meal when Ella is in the hospital.

10. As a child, Birgitta believed that she had a "sweet tooth sugar mouse" living inside her. Discuss the significance of addiction within the text.

Author Bio

Majgull Axelsson is the author of four works of nonfiction as well as one previous novel, Far from Nifelheim, for which she was awarded the 1994 Moa Stipend. The 1997 publication of April Witch in Sweden earned her the prestigious August Prize. She is married, has two children, and lives in Stockholm.

Critical Praise

"[A] ferocious, spellbinding story...completely mesmerizing...**April Witch** will possess you and make you see the world through different eyes."

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