Books

Review: *White Cat, Black Dog*

By Kelly Link ’91CC. (Random House)

By
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|
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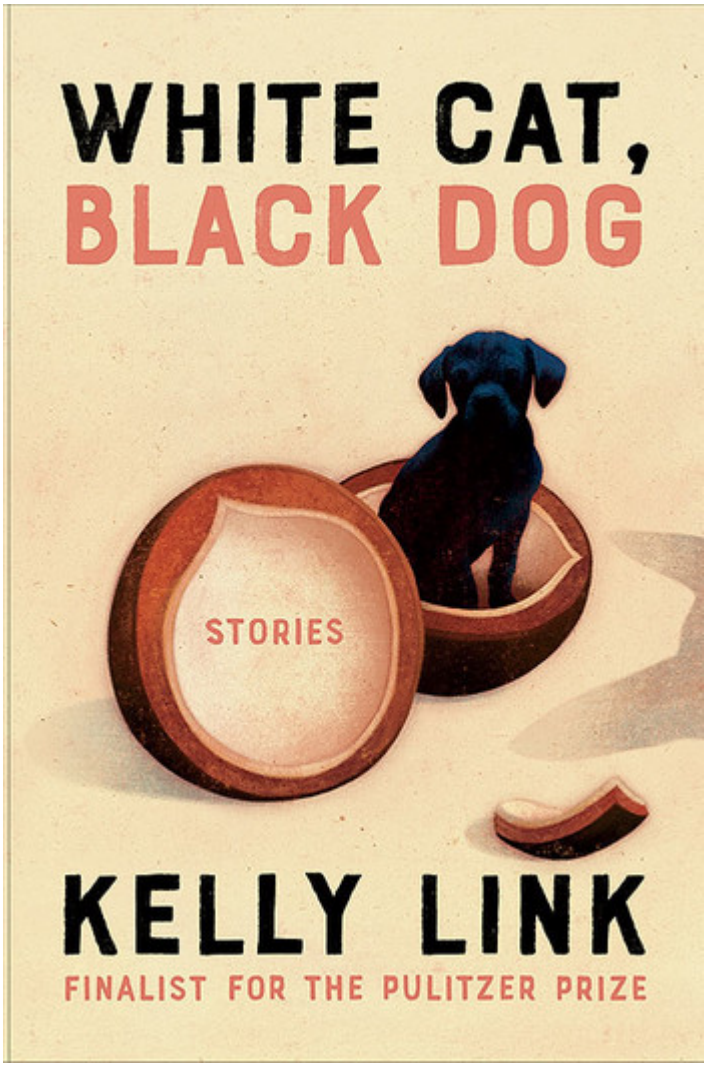

Random House

White Cat, Black Dog, Kelly Link's fifth short-story collection, showcases the 2018 MacArthur "genius" at the top of her uncategorizable form. Link '91CC has been hailed as a fantasist, a fabulist, a magical realist, a science-fiction writer, a horror writer, a teller of ghost stories, and a mystery writer and has been compared to authors ranging from H. P. Lovecraft and Jorge Luis Borges to Shirley Jackson and Angela Carter.

She is all of the above. She is none of the above. Link's short stories may be infused with elements of multiple genres and literary influences, but her originality and idiosyncratic imagination defy classification or comparison. She places herself simply in "the long tradition of the weird," an amorphous category broadly defined by the presence of "something in this story that you don't expect."

Indeed, it genuinely can be said of Link's work that you never know what will happen next. The seven stories collected here (each accompanied by a gorgeously evocative illustration by the Australian artist Shaun Tan) are inspired by classic fairy tales. Hence, the action often (though not invariably) involves the suspension of natural law. Yet Link treats her stories' fantastical elements — talking animals up and down the food chain, cannabis farms run by enterprising cats, witch-queens who reign in hell and can flatten flesh and bones into rags — with a straightforward, rigorous realism. The spooky, unearthly worlds she creates operate with the immutable logic one finds in a fairy tale or a dream.

In "Skinder's Veil," one of two stories with protagonists who are academics, PhD candidate Andy Sims lives in a grubby Philadelphia apartment with a roommate whose hyperactive sex life with his new girlfriend (hilariously rendered by Link) seems calculated to drive Andy crazy as he plugs away at a dissertation that is going nowhere. So when an old friend asks him to take over her housesitting gig in a remote part of Vermont, he quickly accepts. From the time he arrives, though, things seem off-kilter — a feeling intensified by the edibles he's brought with him, as well as some hallucinogenic mushrooms harvested on the property by an attractive stranger who shows up and promptly seduces Andy. More uninvited visitors, animal and human, follow, along with ghosts, doppelgängers, and stories-within-the-story. In short, Link constructs the perfect eerie-yet-realistic fairy-tale setting in which to work her distinctive magic.

Link also brings her offbeat sensibility — one that brims with humor and incisive social commentary — to the exploration of love. In "The White Cat's Divorce," an

aging, youth-obsessed billionaire finds the presence of his three grown sons an intolerable reminder of his mortality. So he dispatches them on a series of yearlong scavenger hunts — for the perfect dog, a suit of the most exquisite cloth, and the "prettiest, wittiest bride" — promising that the son who brings home the most pleasing prize will inherit all his wealth. (Think Rupert Murdoch meets King Lear.) The sons, accustomed to their father's capriciousness, set off on their quests, figuring they'll split the proceeds later. To say more would betray the plot of this deliciously twisted tale, but it is no spoiler to say that in the end, the power of love enables the youngest son to prevail over his father's greed and casual cruelty.

Romantic love, deep and indefatigable, fuels the action in "Prince Hat Underground," one of the book's most overtly fantastical stories. Gary and Prince Hat have been a couple for thirty years, yet Gary knows little about Prince Hat's life before they met. One Sunday, Prince Hat's former fiancée shows up and slyly whisks him away. Heartsick, Gary embarks on a tortuous journey to retrieve his lost love from hell, to which he soon learns Prince Hat has been abducted. En route, and aided by an assortment of talking animals, Gary faces ordeals so harrowing that his destination seems tame by comparison. Yet amid the allegory and the plethora of surreal, often gruesome atmospherics, readers will discover a tender demonstration of the indestructibility of true love.

This wild and wonderful story, along with the other gems in this collection, reveal a mature writer in full command of her craft — which to date has been deployed solely in the service of short stories. For those new to Link's work, *White Cat, Black Dog* is an ideal introduction. For Link completists, there is even better news: a dream long deferred is about to be realized. Her first novel, *The Book of Love*, will be published in spring 2024.

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