



## Fen

*Daisy Johnson*

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**Fen** Daisy Johnson

**Winner of The Edge Hill Short Story Prize 2017**

**Author of *Everything Under*, LONGLISTED FOR THE MAN BOOKER PRIZE 2018**

**'Hauntingly written and full of unabashedly, refreshingly angry women... In a year that made me furious, Daisy Johnson's *Fen* was a howl I didn't know I needed' Celeste Ng**

**'[An] instant classic...a bold, take-no-prisoners collection situated somewhere between Angela Carter and Deborah Levy' Jeff VanderMeer**

The Fen is a liminal land. Real people live their lives here. They wrestle with sex and desire, with everyday routine. But the wild is always close at hand, ready to erupt.

This is a place where animals and people commingle and fuse, where curious metamorphoses take place, where myth and dark magic still linger. So here a teenager may starve herself into the shape of an eel. A house might fall in love with a girl. A woman might give birth to a, well, what?

## Fen Details

Date : Published June 2nd 2016 by Vintage Digital

ISBN :

Author : Daisy Johnson

Format : Kindle Edition 208 pages

Genre : Short Stories, Fiction, Magical Realism, Fantasy, Literary Fiction

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## From Reader Review Fen for online ebook

### Sarah says

Some nice writing, but this was unfortunately another letdown for me - though if magical realism is your thing you might find some stories to enjoy here. For me the stories ended up being pretty repetitive, with protagonists which became interchangeable as the collection went on. Like some other reviewers have mentioned, I feel like this could have been more enjoyable if there were fewer stories but they were more fleshed out, as a few of them definitely had potential.

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### Maddie C. says

Daisy Johnson's debut short story collection "Fen" is a delightful magical collection set in the grassy marshes, forested swamps, and peaty bogs and of the Fen. Mixing reality with folklore, it's beautiful and lyrical, conjuring an atmospheric setting that leaves you with a strange, eerie feeling in your chest as you read on. Perfect for anyone who loves their short stories with a dash of strange and the peculiar.

Story ratings:

1. Starver - ★★★☆☆
  2. Blood Rites - ★★★★★
  3. A Bruise the Shape and Size of a Door Handle - ★★★★☆
  4. How to Lose It - ★★☆☆☆
  5. How to Fuck a Man you Don't Know - ★★☆☆☆
  6. Language - ★★★★★ (Favourite story)
  7. The Superstition of Albatross - ★★★★★
  8. A Heavy Devotion - ★★★★★
  9. The Scattering - ★★★☆☆
  10. Birthing Stones - ★★★★★
  11. The Cull - ★★★☆☆
  12. The Lighthouse Keeper - ★★★☆☆
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### Amalia Gavea says

*"Remember about the albatrosses? We got one on our trail now. I didn't know what it was when I saw it. It was too big to be anything real. I keep thinking about them carrying dead sailors around them."*

I am ashamed to say that I was completely ignorant of the existence of this book. It wasn't included in any of the recommending reading lists I receive and I hadn't read any review of it on Goodreads. I had the luck to become aware of it after a suggestion by the wonderful Jen Campbell in one of her lovely videos that contain treasure for the lovers of haunting fiction. And I searched high and low until I found it. And when I read it, I knew I was suddenly holding one of the best books I've read this year.

This is a collection of short stories by Daisy Johnson connected by the theme of desire, loss and the Otherness in every shape and form and the way we experience these notions particularly during our teenage and early adult years. Here, we have a girl that transforms herself into an eel. Three alluring female vampires are in trouble when they start acting like their unfortunate, highly edible victims. A house comes alive out of jealousy and vindictiveness. A young man returns to his wife. The problem is that he was dead...A sailor's pregnant wife reaches her limits surrounded by the fisherman's superstitions. A mother with a strange and very familiar offspring who wishes to take unto himself the sins of the world. Three siblings share a dark, twisted fate that would put the Lannister House to shame. A woman reminisces on her life while waiting her blind date. A lighthouse keeper is obsessed with a sea creature. These are some of the stories included in this haunting collection. My favourites are: *Starving, Blood Rites, Language, The Superstition of Albatross, A Heavy Devotion, The Scattering*

My first question was why "Fen"? Why naming the book "Fen"? What is the symbolism? So, I did my homework and connected my limited knowledge on the subject to new information and everything made a lot more sense. I knew that Fensalir was the dwelling of Frigg, the Norse goddess of Wisdom and Foresight. A domain of bogs, marshes and springs. And, naturally, most of us know Fenrir, Loki's monstrous offspring that tries to exact revenge for its mistreatment. And then, I discovered that the beautiful fen is associated with water and mists. The Fens landscape, extending from Cambridge to Lincolnshire, is a marshland interrupted by tiny communities of fishermen. It's a land steeped in legends and stories of the paranormal. The Will o' the Wisp, the Black Hound called the Black Shuck...Think of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and you'll get the picture.

Therefore, Folk elements exist throughout the stories. And fens are everywhere. There is obsession, sexual passion, the notion of virginity, the desire to be different, the trouble of being a teenager. The writing is exceptional. Cryptic, poetic, haunting. There is a distinct haziness, as if a mist is hovering over the stories, everything is blurry and grey. The reader needs to read between the lines, see behind the sentences and try to decipher any conclusion that may be there. And this is exactly the kind of quality that makes *Fen* such a mesmerizing, uniquely beautiful book. It definitely reminded me of Jen Campbell's *The Beginning of the World in the Middle of the Night* but in a darker and much more twisted, almost sinister, way.

Is this a book for everyone? No, it isn't. It requires us to suspend all disbelief, to be attracted to bleak, twisted, dark choices. But if you want to experience a unique way of writing and if you love short stories with characters that could easily be protagonists in their novels, then *Fen* is right there for you. And, in my humble opinion, it's a masterpiece of the genre.

My reviews can also be found on <https://theopinionatedreaderblog.wordpress.com/2018/08/15/review-fen-by-daisy-johnson/>

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### **Vanessa says**

**2.5 stars.** Review to follow.

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### **amanda says**

3.5

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### **TheSkepticalReader says**

A strong 3.5 stars.

Stories which came after “The Scattering: a story in three parts” faltered for me. The author still has some wicked writing skills so I would love to read more of her work in the future.

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### **Katia N says**

It is a debut collection by a loosely related short stories. They are all set in the east part of England with its plains, canals, river estuaries and pylons distorting the horizontality of the place. Miss Johnston’s artistic treatment of the area, her imagination transforms it into weary dark, atmospheric setting. This is the place where young girls are coming of age or becoming mothers without having the time to grow. The border between people and animals are fluid as well. And one cannot easily escape. This sense of place is very strong feature of this collection.

The overwhelming feeling i had reading it - as if i digested a bunch of psychedelic mushrooms (which i actually never tried so cannot compare) and going through a series of weird and often unpleasant dreams. Her writing is very imaginative. All her sentences work perfectly. But the ideas and symbols of the stories are starting to repeat themselves, especially at the second part of the collection. And while she is very good describing the feelings of adolescent girls, she is a bit out of her depth when it comes to mothers, babies and the profound transformation of motherhood. I would not blame her for that as she is still young, but for me it was very noticeable. Men in these stories are a little more than the decorations, it seems. (And in one stories they are literally used for food).

Two stories which stood out for me were “A bruise the Shape and Size of a Door Handle” where the house appeared to be jealous of the first love of the girl living in it; and “The Superstition of Albatross” about waiting without hope. Another story worth noting is ‘Starver’ which is about a girl with anorexia and her sister. The story conveys the powerlessness of anyone to help her and it is deeply moving. However, I’ve seen very similar symbolism in “The Vegetarian” by Hang Kan. And there, it is more beautifully crafted and explored.

Overall, it is a promising writer and a worthwhile debut collection. Her writing is very atmospheric and imaginative. However, I hope her next work is more profound and diverse in terms of content.

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### **Adam says**

I tend to think fretting about genre definitions is tiresome, and maybe this is going to be a tiresome review, but it feels like the most helpful way to review this collection. It’s a great illustration of how fantastic or surreal elements don’t make something fantasy or weird fiction. All these stories have some kind of magical thing happen, but they almost all feel like afterthoughts. They are presented almost as reified metaphors or koans wrapping up stories in a way that feels so apt that they barely even register as fantasy. It’s not just that they’re second fiddle to character stuff, which is of course the proper hierarchy even in fantasy. It’s that they

don't really intrude into the stories at all, don't require or evoke any response. They're really just traditional lit fic stories with a sheen of more fun stuff.

Which is fine, of course, and Johnson is clearly very good. I just found these stories a bit hard to relate to. They have a very stark, distanced style. All their young female protagonists doing a lot of things, including principally sexual and romantic things, in a kind of numb compulsion. No one is ever satisfied or joyous or really ever even responds at all. Which is, presumably, part of the point--something about a culture where sex is both the main role women are expected to play but in a way that minimizes their consent and agency and pleasure in that role. I imagine that if you've had experiences like that then it would be easier to relate to these characters. I feel like a bit of a dipshit knocking a book about the experiences of a marginalized group because I couldn't relate to them but I guess that's what happened. They are very eloquent, and the character arcs and imagery are very sharp and potent. But they're just so emotionally skeletal, thin on warmth and humor.

The fen setting is present throughout but it is much more cultural than ecological, focusing on the marginal economies and boredom and patriarchy and poverty. That was the thing I was most hoping to get, something that really brought out the landscape and its tone, and while the prose is evocative the stories are just too sparse and interested in other things to ever really dig into that.

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### **Ezmay Jopling says**

My favourite genre being magical realism, this book definitely ticked boxes for me. It was bizarre, curious and a little bit dark. Qualities I always look for in a good read.

However, I found that the further I got, the more bored I got. Being a book of short stories, it's hard to create a climax and I really felt this is what it lacked. It sort of dragged on.

Also, I felt that maybe it tried a little bit too hard to be weird. I found that it lost clarity as it tried to be mysterious and got to a point where nothing made sense and I just wasn't sure what I was reading about anymore.

Not a bad book, as I finished it, but I fell in and out of it over the 3 months I was reading it. Not a book that you simply can't put down, but something to flick through when you're bored.

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### **Sarah Davies says**

It is going to be very difficult to knock this off the spot of best book of the year for me.

I have always enjoyed books set around harsh landscapes (am I the only person to find Wuthering Heights a 'cosy' novel?) and that is part of what this book is, set on the flat english Fenlands, is. It also appeals to the small town/village girl in me.

The writing is beautiful, and made the elements of magic injected into most of the stories completely plausible, as well as being magical each was so human. Reading this was a joy, I had to stop reading to save some for the next evening.

My particular favourites were 'How to Fuck a Man You Don't Know' and 'Language'. Each story I read I found myself cursing my imagination for not coming up with such simple and natural ideas for myself.

I perceive 'Language' 'Starver' 'A Bruise the Shape and Size of a Door Handle' and 'A Heavy Devotion' as mythical fairytales and know I shall repeatedly re-read them as such.

Not to mention: this book is so bloody beautiful on the outside too.

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### **Lakshika Ranawat says**

We ought to read the kind of books that wound or stab us; If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading it for?

FEN by Daisy Johnson is one such, one of a kind, book that I got a chance to read. Loved it!

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### **Heather says**

*Real people live their lives here. They wrestle with familiar instincts, with sex and desire, with everyday routine. But the wild is always close at hand, ready to erupt. This is a place where animals and people commingle and fuse, where curious metamorphoses take place, where myth and dark magic still linger. So here a teenager may starve herself into the shape of an eel. A house might fall in love with a girl. A woman might give birth to a – well what?*

Daisy Johnson's book came to me by chance. I retweeted a contest, didn't know what books to say I liked, and was given a surprise bundle. The moment I read the blurb, I knew I had to read it. So I've been dipping in and out. Female protagonists each find themselves rooted in a British landscape that's familiar, but surrounded by a world that isn't.

From absorbing personalities of prey, to a house that - as the blurb suggests - might fall in love with a girl, there's a dark magic that touches her stories. After writing this, I'm going back to re-read *Languages* before moving onto the next book, because I think it's possibly my favourite thing I've read this year. Such a striking story.

*Fen* is on one hand ordinary. There's couples, sex, pubs, marriage. But within that, she weaves tales of magic and darkness, of inexplicable things, underpinned with something you understand. A longing, a need, that's ordinary, but works with the otherworldly.

tl;dr. I really bloody like this book.

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### **Simon says**

A surreal and slightly magical collection of short stories. Talking foxes, possessive houses, relationships, monsters and more. A treat of a collection.

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## **Anna Baillie-Karas says**

An extraordinary collection. Spare, accomplished writing with wonderfully controlled weirdness. Characters are raw, honest and sometimes turn into animals. Despite these magical elements, the stories feel poignant, true and rooted in the earth.

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## **Donna Enticknap says**

i liked it. but i was expecting more landscape.. i'd thought that's what the book would be made of, the way other people speak of it.

it is very wild, but somehow also very domestic. i wanted it to break free and run off across the fens and tell me more about that land.

maybe 'the lighthouse keeper' is my favourite, because i like lighthouses and a girl living alone and doing her own thing and celebrating a fish.

but also 'the scattering' which i think was the strongest story. and the longest.

some of the stories felt a bit too weighed down by towns and houses and humanity. the wild is there and creeping in at the edges, and her girls are strange little animals, but i'd been hoping for more of the flatlands and marshes and a real sense of being in a part of the country i'm not familiar with.

i like Daisy Johnston's writing style, her story structures, her mysterious half-revealed characters. i would very much like to read more work by her, but i just hope and wish she'd run a little wilder.

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