

Bear Daughter



Bear Daughter
by Judith Berman
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If you have long awaited the next book from Ursula K. Le Guin (*The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Earthsea Cycle*) or Mary Doria Russell (*The Sparrow*, *Children of God*)—that satisfying mix of the anthropological perspective turned to fantasy writing—you need wait no longer. Judith Berman’s first novel, *Bear Daughter*, belongs in this lofty company. Berman, who received her Ph.D. in Anthropology from Penn in 1991 (“The Seals’ Sleeping Cave: The Interpretation of Boas’ Kwakw’ala Texts”), has turned her magical pen to a story that takes its inspiration from Northwest Pacific Coast folklore and mythology, blends it with Old World and New World storytelling traditions and motifs, and adds a healthy dose of pure fantasy. With her, the reader journeys into a world made so real, mystical, and profound that the experience is not unlike reading such well-wrought classics as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Bear Daughter opens with the protagonist, the young 12-year-old Cloud, waking up after an indefinite slumber to find herself in a human girl’s body. Not only is she chilled to the bone and suspiciously stared at by all the members of the village, but she also has a foggy recollection that when she had put her head down to sleep she had been a bear. How is it that she now awakes, transformed and weak, under her mortal and human mother’s house? How did she lose her bear form? She ponders the delicate fingers, naked skin, and reduced sense of

smell that have mysteriously replaced claws, thick fur, and a good snout. But worse, while confused over her transformation, those around her are also afraid of her, especially her power-hungry stepfather, King Rumble, who resents that she reminds him of her real father, the immortal bear who had kidnapped Rumble’s wife some years back.

Bear Daughter takes us into that in-between realm where a hybrid being must own up to her gifts and disgraces, divinity and humanity. While being socialized into becoming a proper human female by a compassionate elderly aunt, Cloud’s destiny is ultimately to journey to the lands where mere mortals cannot go. Her mission is to confront her bear father’s spirit and to release it from its bondage to an ill-intending wizard. Can a half-mortal survive such a journey?

A tale filled with shape-shifting, human dealings with immortals, shamanic journeys, and human follies, *Bear Daughter* is a heroine’s journey to her origins in search of her bear mask. It is also an adventurous page-turner and a well-wrought story that the storytellers of old would have been proud to tell. There’s just one caveat: don’t pick this book up unless you’re ready to leave everything else in your life undone until you finish it.