



Cooking With Bones

Jess Richards

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My sister is a formwanderer: she is a mirror of want. Each person she meets sees what they want, when they look at her. And she changes for each pair of eyes.

Two sisters, fleeing the city of Paradon, find their way to a village by the sea, where Old Kelp's cottage - and her recipe book - await them.

Amber feels this is where she finally belongs, baking honey cakes each night for the villagers to collect in the morning, using a set of bone spoons that allow her to add truth, lust and confusion to her pies and puddings.

Her little sister Maya is a formwanderer, engineered to reflect the wants of others. All her life she has been like a twin to Amber, but now Amber has changed her mind, and wants Maya to learn how to be herself.

Kip, a child growing up amongst the songs and stories of the village, delivers Amber's ingredients. When an act of terrible violence stirs and sets free the secrets of a generation, only one of these three can reveal the truth...

Cooking With Bones Details

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From Reader Review Cooking With Bones for online ebook

Olive Sparrow says

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I could have done without "boom boom bum". The taxidermist thing was hyped up and then concluded like an afterthought.

Female pronouns are used for Kip until PLOT TWIST she's a boy and then suddenly everyone's using male pronouns. Funny that.

Maya's prose was irritating as anything and I don't think it was necessary to write her like that at all.

Why do all of these peopl

Tim Bedford says

Mainstream reviewers keep trying to liken Jess Richards to the likes of Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood and Joanne Harris. The comparisons are fair enough but say more about the reviewers themselves when faced with something that seems completely new. "Quick find a reference point, any reference point". In both Cooking with Bones and Snake Ropes Richards plays with narrative techniques, with language and with magic of the kind that is somehow just around the corner. She mixes this magic (very well) with (in the case of Cooking with Bones) the Dark Arts of modern science.

Featuring a genetically engineered 'form-wanderer', a girl created to mirror other people's desires, and her non-engineered sister, Cooking with Bones charts the escape of the girls to a rural backwater in a world that is so parallel to our own that you can't but help shiver. Maya, the engineered sister, has her own way of speaking and thinking, a very jumbled way, which is hardly surprising when you consider that she's not designed to be herself.

Ultimately Richards is an incredible story teller but lets her characters do the talking. Cooking with Bones is narrated by the sisters Amber and Maya and also by Kip, a child from the village. Ultimately you can never entirely trust Richards' narrators and she employs my favorite technique of the unreliable narrator incredibly effectively with Maya. This is an massively sophisticated story and a murder-mystery with the ultimate twist.

Thom says

At school, you meet somebody you fancy, and the temptation is to try to make yourself into a copy of them – suddenly you might develop an interest in indie music, vegetarianism, morris dancing or whatever. The impulse comes from a fear that we might not be interesting enough in our own right to attract the attention of our inamorata, so the safest option is to become what they are interested in already. In other relationships though, where the power structure is tilted in our favour, we try to mould people in our own images, particularly children and siblings. This is the type of relationship Jess Richards explores in her second novel,

Cooking With Bones.

The novel centres on a pair of sisters, Amber and Maya. Maya is a formwanderer – a synthetic human, genetically engineered to possess a heightened sense of empathy. People's desires are literally projected onto her, as her features change to reflect their emotions. This makes Maya an ideal companion for Amber, who always wanted a twin, but formwanderers are not always benevolent. They are capable of interpreting human emotions, but lack the social conditioning which prevents our ids from running wild and enacting our darker impulses, and they are linked to a series of murders. The sisters' relationship is complex; Amber wants most of all for Maya to develop her own character, but at the same time she seeks to shield her sister from hurtful or violent emotions. She does this by ensuring that her own personality is the predominant influence on Maya. When they are threatened with separation, which would put Maya in unsupervised contact with others, Amber decides the only course of action is for them to run away, eventually coming to rest in the village of Seachant.

Ms Richards is a skilled creator of worlds. Her debut novel, *Snake Ropes*, described an isolated matriarchal community, in which women dominated trade and justice as well as raising families. Playing with syntax and dialect, she created a rich language for her characters, giving the book a fairytale feel which became increasingly sinister as the narrative progressed. Here, she alternates between two settings. The first is the futuristic dystopia of Paradon (evocative of Paradise, London, Pandora's Box and paragon), where the weather is artificial, emotions are monitored by the state, and soap is sold under-the-counter, plastered with health and safety 'slip' warnings; later, the narrative moves on to Seachant, an isolated rural community which harks back to a folk-memory of wise women and herbal magic. Like Margaret Atwood, Richards is able to locate believable characters within a fantastical world; Seachant feels like one of Shakespeare's blasted heaths, with the elements reflecting the emotional turmoil of the protagonists.

We are introduced to Seachant through the character of Kip, a young boy torn between a mother who dresses him in girls' clothes and a father who wants him to show more masculine qualities. As the pressure of conflicting expectations builds, he retreats into a world of fantasy. A fall temporarily deafens him, isolating him still further from the community, but with the outside world shut off, he is able to find his own agency, coming to understand some of the mysteries of the adult world which surrounds him. Amber also comes of age in Seachant. She and her sister come to live in a deserted cottage, formerly inhabited by a 'crone' called Old Kelp, whose cookery books give Amber a release for her desires, which can be kneaded into the recipes in the form of herbs and spices. As in Barbara Pym's *Excellent Women*, Amber finds a form of expression through her cooking, an act of creation which helps her develop into womanhood, guided by secret knowledge passed down a matrilineal line. The one character who remains dependent on others is Maya; her own ambiguous identity becomes key to a murder mystery plot strand which develops in the second half of the novel.

Cooking with Bones showcases Richards's ability to write with powerful imagination and invent distinctive voices for her characters. She moves between settings and narrative voices seamlessly, creating a world which is at once magical and unsettling. Her fiction is concerned with people who exist on the margins of society; women such as Old Kelp whose knowledge makes them figures of suspicion in superstitious communities, and adolescents who enjoy neither the protected status of children nor the self-assurance of adulthood. It is no coincidence that the real-life inspirations for both of her novels are located on the boundaries of the UK – the island of St Hilda in *Snake Ropes*, and Polperro in Cornwall here. In Richards's fiction, these are places where the influence of the city is limited (there are no police or doctors for miles), and people still live at the mercy of the elements. Ultimately, her characters' chances of survival are determined by their ability to assert their own personalities in the face of the conflicting expectations of the people who surround them. This is a vivid and intoxicating novel, which takes commonplace ideas and twists

them into fantasy, and is full of future promise.

The-Modern-Typewriter says

It had an interesting premise, but the writing style was annoying and I simply couldn't bring myself to care how it ended. None of it grabbed me.

Did not finish.

Carol E C Davidson says

Amazing !

The skill of this author is unbelievable. This book kept me entranced from beginning to end.... so poetic, beautiful and thought provoking.

Gem says

I thoroughly enjoyed this even though I wasn't sure I was going to understand all the twists until nearly the very end. I liked the soft, lyrical feeling, despite the fact there was everything from murder to bullying to sexual awakening. I liked the fairy tale and dystopian feel, the juxtaposition of Paradon and the sea village, the "tangles of three".

Livia says

Davvero un bel romanzo: all'inizio è solo sorprendente, incredibilmente inventivo nonostante la base nota (la società distopica e poi la comunità isolata), ma poi piano piano cresce, e almeno per quanto mi riguarda colpisce in fondo.

Molto più grande della storia di per sé, che alla fine risulta semplice se non addirittura ingenua: la Richards però è una narratrice molto fine, svia senza ingannare, lascia che il lettore si abbandoni alla meraviglia della narrazione anziché concentrarsi solo sulla risoluzione del mistero. Mistero che comunque è centrale per il tema del romanzo, l'identità e le aspettative che nutriamo nei confronti dell'altro (e vice versa). L'elemento fantastico in *Cooking with Bones* proprio non è casuale.

(Mi piacerebbe entrare nel dettaglio ma ogni cosa mi sembra uno spoiler, di nuovo non tanto per il mistero quanto per il piacere della scoperta durante la lettura.)

In finale impossibile definirlo nettamente come *literary* o genere (e preferisco che sia così). Mi ha ricordato però molto Margo Lanagan, la Tanith Lee di *Biting the Sun* e un po' anche Angela Carter, e non in senso derivativo: i fan di queste autrici potrebbero senz'altro apprezzare.

Silvia says

I had long anticipated this read because Jess Richard's first novel, *Snake Ropes*, was one of the reading highlights of my 2013. *Cooking with Bones* is very similar in more than one way – lyrical prose, original story, magic realism, secluded communities and women at the lead – but sadly it didn't live up to the very high expectations I had.

The story begins in Paradon, a dystopian city from which sisters Amber and Maya decided to flee. Amber is human and Maya is a formwanderer, a human genetically designed to mirror other people's desires. Maya became part of the family because of Amber's obsession with having a twin, and she turns out to be just like her sister and the perfect daughter for her parents. Amber, however, would now like her sister to be independent and have her own identity. Leaving Paradon behind, the two sisters arrive in a remote and isolated town and settle in an empty cottage, where they become part of the dynamics and superstitions of the local community.

Like *Snake Ropes*, this novel unravels with dystopian society, myth and fairytales blending with reality. I liked the different elements of the story and the originality of it, but I found it a bit too disjointed, way less solid than Richards' debut, and as a result I didn't feel engaged with it or the characters. I did enjoy the way it tries to explore the nature of desire, identity, empathy, but it felt a bit like unexploited potential for me, even though I cannot really pin down why. Still, Jess Richards is an amazing storyteller, and I look forward to reading what comes up with next.

Allie Riley says

Stunning. A blend of a post apocalyptic future (with some dystopian elements, but not overwhelmingly so) and folk tale, with wonderful recipes thrown in for good measure. Kinda like Joanne Harris meets Margaret Atwood, but with a poetic writing style which reminds me of the likes of Julia Blackburn, Judy Budnitz and Tracy Chevalier.

Kip, one of the protagonists, is a boy who prefers wearing dresses & skirts - this is dealt with sensitively and well. His Dad is pretty much the only one who objects and he is shown to be intolerant and wrong (and he eventually changes his mind).

There is the added bonus of a murder mystery and a phenomenal twist at the end. Absolutely superb.

Highly recommended.

Blair says

I almost don't know where to start with describing *Cooking With Bones*. This is a novel with a lot of different elements and influences, but the story as a whole is unlike anything else I've read. It's a bit like a more refined, complex, fantastical, modernised, and even more original version of Richards' debut, *Snake Ropes*.

The book opens in a city called Paradon. Here we meet two sisters, Amber and Maya. While Amber is an

'ordinary' girl, Maya is a formwanderer - human, but genetically engineered to mirror the desires and needs of anyone she encounters. To Amber, who as a child was desperate to have a twin sister, she is exactly that: a perfect reflection of Amber herself. To the sisters' parents, she is the perfect daughter, the favourite child. Amber, however, is growing out of her yearning for a twin and is starting to want Maya to find her own identity. At the same time, there is growing hysteria about formwanderers in the Paradon media - due to their nature they are able to act on others' unconscious desires, and as a result they are thought to be capable of killing. When the girls' parents find them separate jobs as 'Lab Assistants' (Amber in 'the Tear Lab, where sadness is measured'), Amber persuades Maya they must leave Paradon.

So this is fantasy - kind of. When the action moves outside Paradon, we see that the city is the only part of this world where society has advanced to such a stage. In Paradon, huge mirrored panels keep the city permanently sunny and warm; but in the countryside, life is simple, even backward. In a small village - its name is given as Seachant, but that's only mentioned once; for the most part, it is just 'the village' - the residents are in thrall to an ancient, unseen witch they call Old Kelp, the local school is closed because there's no coal, and the only medical assistance comes from an inexperienced doctor who lives miles away in the next town. Here we encounter the secondary protagonist, ten-year-old Kip, who delivers the 'fair' - a daily offering consisting of baking ingredients and other food - to Old Kelp's cottage every morning.

The story is about what happens when Amber and Maya come to the village, and discover Old Kelp's cottage. It's also about how an affair, two disappearances, a possible death and some difficult secrets affect the lives of the villagers, as seen through Kip's eyes. Ultimately it is about how these events come together with the stories (and beliefs) that have made this place what it is.

Cooking With Bones feels like a fairytale, replete with magic and enchantment, and indeed there are elements of myths, legends and stories woven throughout the narrative - both in the tales the villagers tell each other about Old Kelp, and how the sisters make sense of their old and new lives. Like *Snake Ropes*, this is a largely female-dominated story: although there doesn't seem to be any hierarchy among the villagers, it's Old Kelp who effectively rules the village, terrifying its residents so thoroughly that they won't even approach her cottage or look through the windows for fear of being cursed. And when the legend of Old Kelp is told, it's not the witch who is the hero of the story, nor her lover, the farmer Gilliam, but Gilliam's wife. In turn, this story is mirrored through the actions of the characters, with more than one 'tangle of three' affecting what happens to them all.

One of my favourite parts of the book was the character of Kip. (view spoiler)

There are so many different things to be fascinated by in *Cooking With Bones*: while it's an oddity, it also has something for everyone. It's a dystopian fantasy, a murder mystery, a ghost story and a coming-of-age tale (about more than one character), with sex scenes that are more erotic than most of the stuff you find in erotic novels, but are also weird and discomfiting. It's a story about a girl who wants to be a woman, a girl who doesn't know what she wants to be (even though she could be anything at all), and a boy who might want to be a girl (or might just want to wear their clothes). It's about loving your family, leaving your family, taking on a new identity, the enduring power of stories; the power of fear, fearlessness, lust, fate, and getting to know who you really are. It's like science fiction rewritten by an author of centuries-old fairytales and then rewritten again by a modern-day feminist. There are so many ways it could be read - so many layers of meaning and mystery - but at its heart, it's also an enjoyable, emotive, funny story with great characters, and despite all the strangeness, it's very human.

I really loved this book. It's so rare to find something so unpredictable and unique yet so coherent, interesting and memorable. It's beautifully written - lyrical and evocative (with distinct voices for the three protagonists)

but not so much that it feels pretentious or stops you from relating to the characters. I paid £9.99 for this - the most I've ever paid for a Kindle book, and I did wonder whether it would be worth it. However, I can now quite happily say that it most definitely was. Another beautiful cover, too - I suppose I'll end up buying the hardback edition as well, to match my gorgeous copy of *Snake Ropes*!

Andrew says

A few years ago I read 'Snake ropes' by Jess Richards and loved her ability to mix magic, folklore, and the force of femininity in a unique story. This novel continues these themes but adding an interesting feeling of futuristic speculative fiction to the mix.

At the outset we meet two sisters Maya and Amber in Paradon, a city set probably in the future. Maya is a formwanderer, an individual who reflects the wishes and feelings of those who interact with her back them, she is product of science created at request of parents to support her 'sister' Amber. The sisters run away to a village by the sea where folklore means the villagers leave gifts at the cottage of an old woman 'Old Kelp' in return for honey cakes that have magical qualities, old kelp frightens the villagers who never see her but associate disasters with her anger. We meet other characters including the third subject of chapters Kip a young person who at the beginning leaves the gifts outside old kelps cottage.

Generally I don't automatically choose fantasy stories but this is an author I am growing to love. The stories are so engaging with characters well drawn. The folkloric elements are captivating to the extent that they feel as if they are hundreds of years old and possibly the subject of a favourite folk song. This book also had a wonderful recipe book which had me wondering at the taste whilst mindful of the consequences. The writer captured a sense of place and atmosphere and whilst not specific in place had me vividly immersed in the area .

A really good read and I will anticipate the authors future work with relish and makes me want to broaden my reading into similar works.

Sian says

This story took a little longer to capture me than Richards' debut 'Snake Ropes', but by the end I was definitely won over. Its mythology is just as delicious (the 'fair' tributes, the bone spoons) and the rich poetry of the recipes themselves will leave you feeling plump!

I particularly liked the force and confidence of Amber's character; even shut in a cottage for the majority of the text, her storyline for me was the most alive. Maya was an interesting concept (a manufactured child who reflects people's 'wants') but I'm not sure it played out convincingly: she was as frustrating for me to read as she was for Amber to look after. She was essentially an incomplete, pale version of a real person and I think her chapters reflected this, generally 'weaker' to read and even a bit overly indulgent at times. Kip however was a delight and his wellington-boots-village storyline made a lovely salt-and-sweet contrast with Amber's own dark flavour-soaked one.

I'm thrilled to have discovered this author. Her stories have everything I want; subtlety, surprise, lyricism and mythology that feels lifted from the pages of an ancient book. I'm sorry to have exhausted her catalogue of writing already and can't wait for her next release!

Note: For more food seduction: Please see Catherynne Valente's 'Deathless'.

Nigel says

It is quite a while since I read anything much in the way of fantasy although I used to be quite a fan of the genre. This is fantasy even if it is set in a roughly current world. Two sisters - one a genetically engineered person who reflects the wants of those who look at her - leave a town (which is somewhat big brother like) and find an abandoned cottage by the sea. The interactions between the sisters and the inhabitants of the local village are the subject of the story.

I can understand some frustration from readers about the lives they lead and the enchantments that come from "cooking with bones" but I found it beautifully written in the main and equally quite compelling mostly. On a deeper level the ideas of personal freedoms, getting what you desire and having someone who reflects to you what you want was interesting and thought provoking at times. I'll certainly read *Snake Ropes* based on this one.

Lena says

First, this book has a lot of good ideas. I was super stoked about the premise, but unfortunately, it turned out to be sorely lacking.

I just.. Didn't GET the book. It felt super hazy and confused most of the time. I think it's supposed to be poetic, but it just feels forced and weird. I didn't feel the character development (or the characters for that matter) and let's just not speak of the worldbuilding. I liked the lgbtq aspects, they were well done, and the ending was a surprise. Still, I can't get myself to give this book more than 1.5 stars.

Girl with her Head in a Book says

So. Hmm. *Cooking With Bones*. I'll start off by saying this - I didn't love it. I read *Snake Ropes* a little while back, having longed for it throughout its hardback-dom and then felt slightly disappointed when it all felt a little bit too clever by half. This one just felt a bit confused. I was playing it a little safe already in that this was a library read rather than one I was prepared to risk actually spending money on but getting to the finish line felt like a bit of a slog. The cover describes it as 'Sci-fi Mary Berry style, with a twist of gothic.' If we continue the cooking metaphor, it felt like a great big melting-pot, where Richards had thrown in every idea that she came up with and the result leaves a very puzzling taste and not a great deal of interesting flavour.

For my full review: <http://girlwithherheadinabook.blogspot.com>...
