

Author creates fearsome world full of ghosts and horror in rural Vermont

"Small Spaces"

by Katherine Arden

G. P. Putnam's Sons

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Katherine Arden, the author of "The Bear and the Nightingale" and its two sequels, now offers middle schoolers a Vermont ghost/horror story. At its center is Ollie (Olivia) Adler, a sixth-grader who has shut down completely after her charismatic mother's death in an accident. Her only friends (besides her supportive father) are books; her only comfort her mother's broken digital watch, which she wears all the time.

One late October day after school, when Ollie is about to bike to her secret reading place by the swimming hole, she sees her classmate Phil teasing Coco Zintner, a petite girl with strawberry blond hair, by grabbing her notebook and showing everybody that she has drawn a picture of herself and Brian Battersby, the Jamaican star of the middle school hockey team. Disgusted by the cruelty, Ollie shies a stone at the back of Brian's head.

His fall turns all the attention from Coco (who rescues her notebook) to Ollie, who pedals off before she can be given a detention. But at the swimming hole, she finds a woman who is tearfully preparing to drown an old book with yellowed pages. When Ollie offers to take the book, the woman

says he is making her destroy it as part of a bargain. Ollie grabs the book, but before



she can escape, the woman, realizing she's a sixth-grader, tells her: "Avoid large places at night. Keep to small."

Ollie rides home as fast as she can, but before she can tell her dad what happened, he says the school has called: she has to talk to the principal in the morning. He also mildly suggests that if she wants to throw things, she should rejoin the softball team instead of hiding in books—whereupon she stomps upstairs and hides in the book she has saved.

The book is called "Small Spaces," and it's about Jonathan and Caleb, two 19th century farm boys who love one girl. When she chooses to marry Jonathan, Caleb disappears.

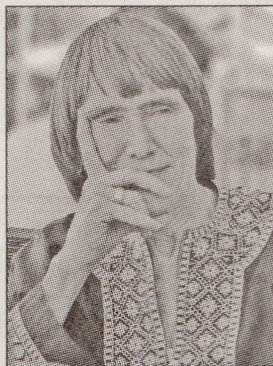
Jonathan finds him, but tells his wife that to do so, he has had to make a bargain with the Smiling Man. Years later, Jonathan and Caleb disappear. The story emerges in pieces, interspersed with Ollie's conversation with the principal and Brian (who surprisingly exonerates her) and with the sixth-grade field trip to Misty Valley Farm. At the farm, Ollie and Brian both uneasily notice the farm's many scarecrows, and Ollie is shocked to find the graves of the characters in "Small Spaces."

Finally, they leave the farm in an eerie mist—and the school bus breaks down. As dusk descends, the weird bus driver tells Ollie "At night they'll come for you." Glancing at her mother's digital watch, Ollie suddenly sees a message: RUN. Is it possible that ... ? Maybe. Ollie leaves the bus. Coco follows her. Together they stumble through the mist into the unfamiliar forest, followed by Brian, who tries to stop them. And

thus the three sixth-graders encounter the fearsome world on the far side of the mist, where they can be safe only in small spaces.

The fearsome world is splendidly portrayed, as is the growth of mutual respect that develops between the three kids as they struggle to survive. Behind the horror lurk little wisps of Russian folklore and literature: the watch that advises Ollie is a contemporary version of the protective doll that saves Vassilissa the Beautiful from Baba Yaga, and the terrifying, Mephistophelean Smiling Man has a cat named Behemoth, which middle schoolers may meet later in Bulgakov's "The Master and Margarita." Through it all, the book remains entirely Vermont and entirely terrifying—a wonderful achievement that horror fans of all ages will love.

Laura Stevenson lives in Wilmington and her most recent novels are set on Boyd Hill Road.



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson