

## Kit Loves Caboodle

By Valerie Sayers  
Published: May 15, 1994

**THE MAGIC TOUCH** By Rachel Simon. 307 pp. New York: Viking. \$21.95.

BORN of a mother two days dead, Celeste Kipplebaum Runetoon Kelly heals the spiritually and physically wounded through sex. Given this premise, it is fitting that the novel telling the story of her life is more or less equal parts fairy tale, satire, parable and comic book (minus the illustrations but with swell, inventive book design).

"The Magic Touch" is Rachel Simon's first novel; however, she is not a shy or tentative writer. Certainly not tentative. The sex scenes, of which there are many, are not repressed. Ms. Simon opens the story of Celeste Kelly with the ultimate woman-on-top scene, a prologue in which Celeste outsmarts a murdering rapist. The dreamy power struggle reduces the villain to an infantile state, which makes Celeste -- what? Mother? Whore? Both, the narrative implies, and it will deal with the suggestion explicitly in the pages to come.

After the exuberant, pow-bang-thwap prologue, the novel moves back in time to tell the story of Celeste's arrival in this -- or, more accurately, her -- world. Her unwed teen-age mother, Marina, collapses and dies at the clinic where she's gone to give birth. Two days later, Celeste crawls out, and Marina rises from the dead -- sort of. Celeste is raised by Marina's mother, Edwina Kelly, who runs an orphanage and trains her charges as knights. Miss Kelly wants the orphans to "develop into their own selves."

Celeste's own self is a powerful wonder. She knows early on that she has a gift for healing with touch (and reading shadows and speaking the languages Leaf and Creek), but it is not until she menstruates voices (no kidding) that she begins to discover her chance to become a knight. She embarks on a career of saving lost souls through sexual encounters.

If all this sounds whimsical, it is. This is the kind of novel with characters named Fig Newton, with words like "orgasmaverse," with a steady supply of exclamation points, italics and phrases written in CAPITAL LETTERS. Celeste's story is told in a variety of narratives (extravagant tall tales, tape recordings, diary entries, "Nightline" interviews), and her grandmother's story is inserted periodically on pages printed white-on-black.

The various narratives are reminiscent of the work of Kurt Vonnegut and Richard Brautigan (though not at the same time). The storytelling reflects a giddy pleasure in the sounds of words and a taste for fantasy with heavy overlays of popular culture. It's as if the language itself has taken off its clothes and is dancing naked in the moonlight. As in Brautigan's works, the danger of too much cuteness lurks, and Ms. Simon sometimes succumbs: she names a pair of lovers Kit and Caboodle; she lets Loretta the Dodge (yes, a car) purr outrageous dialogue; she flirts with a dizzy brand of silly spiritualism.

On the other hand, a writer who describes sex as "the true in the troubadour! The heat in the meteor! The carn in the carnivore! O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!" is worth listening to, at least. Ms. Simon is a real writer, by gorry by jingo by gee by gosh by gum. Her language sings or, as she might put it, "jizzles." And certainly it's high time for a woman on top of the story as well as on top of the rapist.

The plot goes far beyond the story of woman as sexual healer, though, and dances off in a theological direction. The reader learns at the outset that Celeste's grandmother believes in neither God nor the Devil, but there are hints that both may make appearances in the novel. These appearances involve some complicated twists of plot and theology. Of particularly creepy interest is the Gacy Guru ("name lifted from your friendly neighborhood serial killer"), whose followers include a strangely familiar handsome Vice President. Meanwhile, complications in the moral realm abound. Celeste has fallen in love with a prince -- what about her sexual healing escapades? And AIDS is still on the rampage, even in a fairy tale.

It's obvious that the morals of this moral tale include the notion that SEX IS A POSITIVE LIFE FORCE! (Or, as the character God says, in one of those Brautigan danger zone moments, "Sex is about frolic and vivacity and trust and love.") Certainly the power of positive sex wins out when Celeste has it out with the Devil (guess how).

And yet -- and yet, the author's note at the beginning of the book refers to Celeste's impact on history as "cataclysmic." I don't mean to go after this hot air balloon of a novel with a deconstructive dart, but "cataclysmic" has a strong negative connotation -- and that is not the only moment of moral ambiguity, especially with a jealous prince on the scene. Celeste's physical relationship(s) with the Devil are certainly dualistic. And while the novel's vision of God is meant to be comforting as well as funny, when he says, "You can feel me through lollipops, shady trees, music, toboggans," the touchy-feely narrative undercuts its own attempts to write a new resurrection myth.

I'm much more inclined to go along with "The Magic Touch" 's delight in the power of women and in the sound of language, much more inclined to buy its condemnation of megastores and sitcoms and Vice Presidents with hair on their uvulas. Rachel Simon is a sharp, expansive satirist, and "The Magic Touch" is an auspicious debut. Callooh! Callay! FEELIN' GROOVY

For Celeste, healing seemed to encompass anything physical. She set broken bones, calmed menstrual cramps, adjusted vision to 20/20, cured the common cold, cleared up acne, melted cancer, soothed jock itch and made dental decay cry uncle. . . .

Healing also did for Celeste what artificial stimulants did for entire generations of Americans. It gave her a rush. Hands on the sufferer's chest, she could feel the illness rise up from the body, feel it lock in on her presence, feel it charge her at the speed of light. It shot into her like a sudden dream, like a glass-shattering scream, like 10 cc's of sensation. She would close her eyes as it entered and remove her hands. It would splash inside, triumphant, plotting its way to pain -- but suddenly realize something was wrong. It couldn't go forward. It was trapped. And then it would begin flailing about, a fish gasping desperately for water. But there was no escape. The more it writhed, the quicker it broke apart, until it thrashed itself into its own destruction.

Throughout the process, Celeste wouldn't feel the toothache, suffer the cold. She wouldn't feel sick at all. She would feel like soda after you shake it up. She would feel like fireworks at their climax. She would feel her senses go erect.

In short, she would feel great. From "The Magic Touch."

*Valerie Sayers is director of creative writing at the University of Notre Dame. Her most recent novel is "The Distance Between Us."*

---

[Home](#) | [Times topics](#) |

[Member Center](#)

[Copyright 2013](#) [The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#) |

[Index by Keyword](#)

---