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Tender Morsels, winner of the 2009 World Fantasy Award for Best Novel

'It is with a mixture of respect and delight that I greet any book capable of blasting an entire genre out of the water with its audacity and grace. *Tender Morsels* is such a book.' Meg Rosoff, *Guardian*

'The reader is immersed in it from the beginning. Look beyond the shocking scenes and this is a novel that explores the most profound human emotions with a clear gaze; it made me weep like a child at the end.' Stephanie Merritt, *Observer*

'A work of genius.' Dinah Hall, *Sunday Telegraph*

Red Spikes

'Much lauded as a master of the medium, Margo Lanagan exceeds expectations with *Red Spikes*. The tales are historically evocative and earthly at the same time as being haunting and ethereal. An enduring collection that defies classification.' *Bookseller*

'These works demonstrate a powerful sense of the marvellous.' *Publisher's Weekly*

White Time

'There is a great deal to admire about these stories, not least the author's terse, angular prose and her extraordinary talent for creating hybrid worlds. As in the best fantasy and science fiction the characters and settings are familiar enough to resonate emotionally while remaining wholly other; Lanagan's vision of the world skews effortlessly towards the seriously weird.' Meg Rosoff, *Guardian*

'Ten more compelling stories. Taut, vivid, original: another winner.' *The Horn Book*, USA

THE BRIDES OF ROLL ROCK ISLAND

MARGO LANAGAN



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31 Beaumont Street
Oxford OX1 2NP, UK

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MISSKAELLA
PROUT



Yes, Misskaella, seals. See? She loves them!

The seals gleamed in the sunshine. I tried to crawl to them, but Bee held firm to my ankle, and I could not go. Pink flowers on long stems nodded about my ears. I did not even have enough of a mind to know that the cliff dropped away there; I thought that the seals lay on the ground right in front of me, that they were seething worms or caterpillars, sleek and soft-looking. I thought I could catch up a handful of them, and understand them as I understood everything, by putting them in my mouth.

Ann Jelly carried me down the cliff path, back and forth in a tipped-steep world. As we went, I saw the seals more truly. They were grown-up-people sized; they were bigger even than that. Still I reached for them. I leaned out from Ann Jelly's shoulder, and when she turned I leaned across her face.

Look, she's not at all afraid, she said.

They would roll on you and crush you, Missk, for all their big friendly eyes.

How they smell!

Oh, the king of them down there, fighting off those ones, isn't he the ugliest thing you ever laid eyes on?

I did not even see the king, for all the mothers so close to me, for all the seal-babies that roamed and moaned over them. I did not find their smell foul; it was all one with their fascination. The mothers looked warm; I wanted to crawl over their hills, so much softer than those rocks and sharp periwinkles I had explored before, so much freer than being clasped tightly to Ann Jelly's side, and not carried where I wanted. Why did

we hang back so? Why did she not put me down, so that I could crawl to them and climb among them? Why did Bee turn us back, when we had only strolled once and distantly along the edge of the herd? Why must we climb away to the seal-less parts of the world? We might touch them! They might like to be patted, as dogs and cats did. Their babies might approach and speak to us! I pushed myself high against Ann Jelly's shoulder and watched the seals sink away. I would have cried at the loss of them, if I'd not been so busy being surprised by them, a flap of life here, a surge there, a head lifting to regard us.

We went home, and tea and bread happened as always, its clatter and talk held in by the kitchen walls, so different from the flying world outside, the wind and sun. I was tucked in between Tatty and Grassy Ella, behind my towering teacup.

And you should have seen Missk with the seals, Mam, down at Crescent! Lorel said across the table. I raised my face hopefully from my bread. Sometimes when they talked of me Mam lost her sharp look. She even smiled on me now and then.

I should? Mam poured and put down the pot. She looked at me, and Lorel's words went in and pinched her face tighter. I watched her around my cup with one eye and then with the other.

She couldn't keep her eyes off them! said Bee, out of sight of me. *She wanted to crawl in among them. Of course we did not let her.* She sounded nervous now. She must have caught sight of Mam.

It's true, she was very interested, Ann Jelly apologized. *I have never seen her so fixed on anything—*

Strange, Mam said. Was anyone else about, at Crescent Corner?

There was a pause full of worry at Mam's loud voice, then, 'Twas just us six, Bee's voice came timidly.

Just us six, and a thousand seals, said Grassy, poking over her bread all unawares.

Good, said Mam. Watch her near those things. She watched me hard, herself. And don't tell anyone else of this, that she loves them. No one needs to know that. Do you understand?

We were all quiet. Grassy looked down at me. My face tried a squashed-feeling smile at her, but she did not smile back.

Yes, Mam, said Bee.

Nanny Prout's house smelt of the ages, and was gloomy from all those years holding only Nanny. She had never wanted company, said Dad, but had shut herself away from everyone, even us her family. She would still have been shut away if she'd had her choice, but because she was so ill Aunt Baxter and Aunt Roe could busy their ways in and interfere. It was they who had told us to come; this was the last time Nanny would be fit to see us, they'd said.

Aunt Roe had put us in the chilly parlour. The dead fireplace was hidden behind a screen; a dark dresser loomed against the wall. Mam and Dad sat on the edge of the strange sideways couch. The pin in Mam's shawl sucked all the light from the room, so that the rest of us must sit in dusk. Her hair, freshly tidied, left her face out in the cold, unsoftened. I wore a dress newly-handed down from Tatty, and I felt blowsy and floaty in

it, not held together properly; cold air crept in under the skirt. I clambered up between Mam and Dad, and drew some warmth off them.

Nobody spoke; that was alarming. No girl whispered, so Billy had nothing to snipe at. We all listened to the sickroom, the clinks and footfalls there, the murmuring aunts, the silence from the bed. We hardly knew Nanny Prout, any of us children. Ann Jelly remembered her outside Fisher's, windblown, shouting (*She didn't even seem to know I was a relative!*). Billy and Bee and Lorel had seen her in an armchair – perhaps that armchair, with the brown flowers on. I had no idea who she was, what she looked like, whether I should like her or be afraid. But her dying must be tremendously important; look at us waiting about so warily. The whole house, the whole day and town beyond it, leaned in over her bed, preparing itself. What would it be like? Was a near-dead nanny awful to look upon? I feared so, from Mam and Dad's silence and stillness either side of me.

With a rustle of her brown dress, into the doorway stepped Aunt Roe, her face white and pointed. She waved us out of the parlour as if she were vexed with us. 'She's very tired,' she said, her own voice weary as if to demonstrate. 'You mustn't stay long.'

She led us in to the sickroom, and stood aside from the door. 'It's Froman, Mam,' she said accusingly, 'and Gussy and all their children.' She turned and flapped her hand at us again, as if we must step forward for a beating.

Mam pushed us children into the room. Ann Jelly led the line of us alongside the bed – which held a tiny person, not

much more than a doll. Tatty nudged me forward; the others passed me along; Ann Jelly held me by the shoulders. Nanny Prout's hand on the coverlet, pale yellow, held not the slightest tremble of life.

'Froman,' said Nanny. Oh, the relief that she could utter a word! Her face frightened me, so collapsed and fissured that I worried it would crumple quite away. The bonnet frill around it tried vainly to distract from the fearsomeness.

'Mam.' Dad gave a little bow. Anywhere else the bigger girls would have laughed at him, but here in the room with Nanny and her approaching death, none of them even snickered.

'And Augusta?' Nanny managed. It did seem cruel of Mam, to have so many syllables in her name that the old lady must labour through.

'Nanny,' said Mam, as if that name, though not as hard to utter, were just as distasteful.

'And all the little ones.' Nanny looked along the taller row of us. 'Don't tell me their names again. There are too many, and what is the point, now, of my remembering them?'

'Mam, what a thing to say!' Aunt Baxter fluted. She laughed, and twitched the quilt at Nanny's far elbow.

Nanny's colourless eyes worked their way back along the lower three of us. Her gaze met mine and stopped. She had been pretending interest, but she ceased it now. Her lips poked out, pulling her wrinkles after them like the mouth of a draw-string purse.

'This one here, though, at the end, the littlest.' Her voice

was dry and partial. 'I don't like the look of her. She's a bit slanted, a bit mixed.'

'That's our Misskaella,' said Dad in his comfortable voice. 'There's nothing wrong with Missk.' But Mam pulled away and frowned at me, as if she had never noticed me before.

'She harks back, I tell you,' said Nanny. 'It is in her mouth and nose, and just in the general set of her. There's no denying it. She'll be hard to marry – that's if any men are left on Rollrock, after this rash of daughters has gone through. Look at them all! Only the one boy – and him bad-tempered, by the look.'

'That's Billy,' said Dad a bit more testily. 'William, after your grandfather. He's a little afraid of you, Nanny, is all that face says.'

'Hmph.'

She *was* frightening, that Nanny-doll. I had thought a dying person might be weak and gentle, and distressed to be departing. But she was all opinions, and no manners to keep them inside her. She could say what she liked; being so old and dying gave her the right. I realized that my mouth was hanging open as I waited on her next judgement, and I snapped it shut – and thus drew Nanny's gaze back to myself.

'Yes,' she said with dislike, 'You can see it clearly, looking from the others to this one. She is much later than the rest.'

'There are four years,' said Mam, 'between her and Tatty, the next youngest.'

'There is your problem, then,' said Nanny. 'Prout men should never breed late. Nor Prout women. They turn, you

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know, in their autumns, and then you get miscast faces like this, and who knows what behind them?"

'Oh, Mam,' Aunt Baxter laughed even higher than before. 'Here is Froman, come to see you before you go to your rest, and all you can do is fix on his children and criticize!' But her face was all dismay, looking at me. My hand came up to touch my nose and mouth, but they were only the same nose and mouth I had always had; there was nothing new or monstrous about them.

Only Dad was allowed to kiss Nanny goodbye – not that any of us minded one ounce not putting our lips to that crinkled cheek. It would be cold, I thought. It would smell of tallow wax, maybe, or mushrooms.

Then we were dismissed. Dad was quiet walking along the lanes, but the rest of us were glad to be out in the moving air. Billy lifted his head and looked about, for a change, and the girls danced from step to step.

Tatty eyed me where I walked at Mam's hand. 'She had a set against our Missk, didn't she!'

'Hush, Tat,' said Mam, and Dad clicked his tongue. But already Grassy and Lorel were carolling, 'Ye-es! Missk and her funny looks!'

"'Miscast", she said.' Ann Jelly too examined me. 'What could she mean?'

'I've always thought Miss *did* look differently,' Tatty galloped sideways ahead of us. 'Not quite part of the same family.' And now they all stared. I screwed up and stretched my face so that they should not see my difference clearly.

'That's *enough*,' said Mam. 'Take the word of a dying woman, would you, one who's always hated me and mine? Of course she's going to find fault with us! And who safer to insult than the very littlest of all!'

'Gussy,' said Dad.

'Tell me it isn't true, then,' said Mam. 'She won't miss us and I won't grieve after her.'

He shrugged and looked away, and the matter seemed done with. But Mam did not look down at me, and her grip was tight and wrenching of my shoulder, as if I ought to be punished rather than consoled.

'You see?' said Bee.

'I don't,' said Tatty. 'Which stone is it, even?'

Neither could I see. I stood away from the garth wall. The stones, in the lumpiest part above the gate, looked even more higgledy-piggledy in this slant of light.

'The seal head is fallen away *that* side of the maiden.' Lorel waved to the left and then to the right. 'See the skin of it, along and across, those three lines coming to the point, then to the little tail?'

'The tail is almost worn right away,' said Bee.

'Oh, *that* is the tail, is it?' said Tatty doubtfully.

'And so the maiden is *rising* out of the skin, you see? And her beautiful hair? That is all those whirls – though Nanny Paul used to say her nanny told her that all their hairs were flat as boards, not a kink or curl among them.'

'She has a big head,' I said. 'And hardly any body at all.'

'See, Tat? Even Missk can see her,' said Grassy.

'A head and a bosom,' Billy chewed a grass-stalk, slumped against the opposite wall. Lorel laughed dirtily. The circles of the stone bosoms popped out at me, the peck-marks of the nipples. My face went hot. Imagine carving such a thing, for all to see!

'She doesn't look a very happy maiden,' said Tatty, 'to be come to live among us.'

'Oh, they were right miseries, everyone says,' said Grassy.

'Everyone?' said Bee. 'Who have you heard say? I cannot get anyone to talk for long about it. Mam closes up like a trap, and Dad will find something he must be busy with. And Nanny Paul, sometimes she would rattle on as long as you liked, but most often she would only put up her eyebrows, insulted.'

'Maybe it's *boring* for them,' groaned Billy. 'Seeing as it never happens any more.'

'There's nothing keeping you here, Billy,' said Bee crisply. 'Go and kick footer if you're so bored of us.'

'Plenty say it never happened at all, girls coming out of seals,' said Lorel.

'Well, how could it?' said Tatty. 'It would be like a cat birthing a dog, or a horse throwing a goat.'

'There's no birthing of it at all,' said Ann Jelly. 'It is the same creature. Only its skin comes off and the girl is within.'

'Oh, pfft,' said Tatty. 'Whoever heard of such a thing?'

'I've heard of it,' said Grassy. 'What's wrong with *your* ears?'

'And you *hide* that skin,' said Bee darkly. 'For if she finds it,

she snatches it up and is gone, no matter how nicely you've treated her, no matter how many children she's had on the land.'

'She will abandon her *children*?' said Ann Jelly, and I was shocked too. I knew Mam didn't like us, but I couldn't imagine her leaving us. We eyed the bosomy woman high on the wall. She stared out unashamed.

'As if they never were,' said Bee. 'And never come back to visit them, either.'

'What dreadful creatures,' said Lorel. 'What would a man ever want with one of those?'

Ann Jelly and I sat with Gert along Strangleholds' step, in the sunshine.

'Slide aside,' said Gert's mam. 'I must go down to May's and get those eggs. Stay about till I'm back, Gert. I'll not be blamed for letting Prouts' little one wander off.'

We let her through and watched her hurry along the lane. She paused to greet Ardle Staines's mam, then continued on around the corner.

'I'll show you something,' Gert scrambled up.

Ann Jelly made eyebrows at me and jumped up too.

After the sunshine, all I could see in the house was the window through the back. Gert's parents' bedroom was quite black, the two girls hissing and giggling in there. I stepped in and waited, and their shapes emerged, shadows bent over a chest with its lid open against the wall.

'Don't move anything,' said Gert. 'It's right at the back