

# Review: 'When Women Were Dragons,' by Kelly Barnhill

By Trisha Collopy

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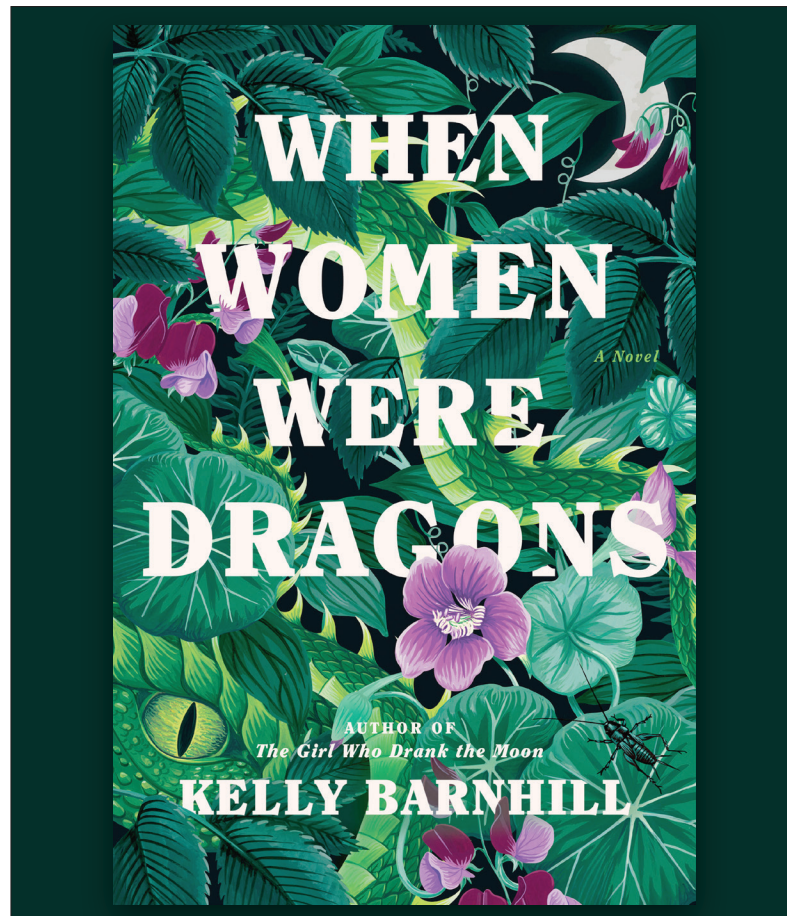
What can't be named can't be questioned in this new novel by Minneapolis writer Kelly Barnhill, which immerses readers in a post-World War II period of conformity and repression with a speculative twist.

The Newbery Medal-winning children's author dedicates her first novel for adult readers to Christine Blasey Ford, whose testimony at the confirmation hearings of Justice Brett Kavanaugh unleashed the rage of many women.

Barnhill transforms that suppressed rage into a wellspring of power, creating an alternate timeline where women told to suffer in silence instead spontaneously transform into dragons, often immolating abusive men in the process.

The story opens in a small Wisconsin town, where Alex, a budding scientist, grows up in a household full of secrets.

No one will say why her mother disappears for months, and her unmarried Aunt Marla moves in to take care of the family. Or



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why her father disappears into his work, sometimes not returning home at night.

Meanwhile, alarming events are happening in her community, as women spontaneously "dragon," erupting in a conflagration that sometimes levels buildings.

These isolated eruptions are hushed up, suppressed by the local news media and by police and fire crews that respond to the "incidents." Scientists who

seek answers to the phenomenon are called in for questioning and blackballed from their universities.

Aunt Marla is a breath of fresh air in this stifling environment. She's a mechanic who works in a body shop — a large woman who takes up space and stares down men who cross her.

"My aunt was big and loud and shiny. Sometimes she laughed louder than any man I knew. I found her thrilling, but terrifying too. She had a way of occupying a room that felt dangerous," Alex reflects.

Then Aunt Marla disappears during a "mass dragoning" of nearly 650,000 women, leaving a baby behind. Beatrice is adopted as Alex's "sister," and any mention of her aunt or dragons is forbidden. Her mother begins obsessively weaving knots, and her parents cut off Alex's friendship with a neighbor girl, who also disappears.

The odder things become, the more Alex is forced to pretend she doesn't see what she sees. The silence and conformity, what one character calls a "mass forgetting," are as suffocating as a world that uplifts men while constraining women to secondary roles.

If much of the novel feels like a full-throated howl, an indictment of a system of gender apartheid, an alchemy occurs in the final chapters. Barnhill relaxes into her characters, and it's here that "When Women Were Dragons" really sings. The stakes feel more genuine as Alex navigates her first relationship and also grapples with letting Beatrice, whom she has parented for years, find her own path.

The novel shifts from the suffocating conformity of the 1950s to a world where gender identity, and the family structures built around it, turn out to be more fluid than anyone could have imagined.

Written on the heels of that bruising Supreme Court battle, and before the current "Don't Say Gay" laws and push to ban books, "When Women Were Dragons" reminds us how difficult it is to put the knowledge of freedom back into the bottle and the cost to a society that tries.

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