**Press Kit**

***RING* by Michelle Lerner**

**“**The reader is taken step-by-step through this powerful story with deep lessons on grief, life, and suicide. Not an easy read, but one that is ultimately uplifting.”

**– *Booklist*, Starred Review**

“Former lawyer and poet Lerner’s (*Protection*) debut novel is sure to be an emotional read that readers will be thinking about long after finishing. Lee, who is nonbinary, is overcome by grief after their 23-year-old daughter dies mysteriously. Lerner’s writing style movingly gives readers a view inside Lee’s grief-stricken mind…This novel, which has a feel of a modern classic, is a must purchase addition for people facing grief and looking for hope and healing. It will leave readers with new insights and many questions about grief, suicide, and spirituality.”

**—Library Journal**

“Michelle Lerner’s *RING* is a beautifully written, profoundly moving story of a mother’s journey from grief to hope, marked by lyrical prose and emotional depth. Comparable to *Without Jenny* and *Take Me With You*, Lerner’s masterful storytelling captures the transformative power of resilience, love, and the search for renewal.”

**—BookLife/Publishers Weekly**

“Somber and emphatic, *Ring* is a breathtaking novel that muses through the complications of grief via a parent learning how to live through it.”

**—Clarion-Foreword Reviews**

*“RING* is truly a balm for the psyche. I will never forget this beautiful book."

**—Porochista Khakpour, Author of the Memoir *Sick* and Other Books**

“A beautiful story of a journey fueled by grief and steeped in love. The pages turned themselves for me.”   
**—Amy B. Scher, Bestselling Author of *This Is How I Save My Life***

“Unique and powerful, *Ring* is a stunning, hypnotic book.”

**—Ellen Pall, Author of the Acclaimed Novel *Must Read Well***

“Do people need to remember how to live before they decide to die? In *RING*, Michelle Lerner thoughtfully explores the complexities of grief and assisted suicide through Lee’s journey to a snowbound sanctuary. Touching and thought-provoking, the narrative portrays therapeutic interventions as a path toward resolution."

**—Kirkus Reviews**

**URL for Michelle Lerner’s Book Launch in NYC 012625**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mR629Z8F_U0>

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*Publisher Info*

* Been a top-ten indie since its start in 1992
* Profiled by Publishers Weekly
* Publishes 4-6 books a year
* Distributed nationally by Baker & Taylor Publisher Services
* Frontlist and backlist titles frequently optioned or bought by Hollywood producers
* Publishes almost all types of books, from memoirs to mysteries, young adult novels to history and biography
* Bancroft books have received numerous starred reviews—four, in fact, for two 2018 summer books—and have won numerous awards
* *The Missing Kennedy,* a NYT ebook bestseller, was on the cover of *People Magazine* when published in 2015
* Published the books of four Pulitzer Prize winners (Alice Steinbach, Stephen Hunter, Elizabeth McGowan, and Mark S. Johnson)
* Operated internship program with colleges and universities around the country each semester (and summer) since 1992

**At a Glance: The Standout Elements of *RING* and Its Author**

**Critical Acclaim for *RING*:**

* **Booklist**: Starred review, calling it a "powerful story with deep lessons on grief, life, and suicide."
* **Library Journal**: Described as a "modern classic," and "a must-purchase addition for people facing grief and looking for hope and healing."
* **BookLife/Publishers Weekly**: Praised for its "lyrical prose and emotional depth," comparable to *Without Jenny* and *Take Me With You*.
* **Foreword Reviews**: Called "breathtaking," exploring grief with profound empathy.
* **Porochista Khakpour**: Renowned author described it as "a balm for the psyche" and unforgettable.
* **Kirkus Reviews**: Noted its thoughtful exploration of grief and assisted suicide.
* **Amy B. Scher**: Bestselling author said, "The pages turned themselves for me."
* **Ellen Pall**: Acclaimed novelist called it "a stunning, hypnotic book."

**Unique Literary Contributions:**

* **Non-Binary Representation**: Features a non-binary protagonist seamlessly integrated into the narrative without sensationalism, normalizing LGBTQ+ identity in literary fiction.
* **Philosophical Depth**: Explores profound themes such as grief, suicide, spirituality, and the search for hope, making it emotionally resonant and thought-provoking.
* **Atmospheric Setting**: Set in a remote Canadian sanctuary with vivid, sensory descriptions that enhance its emotional and visual impact.

**Author Achievements:**

* Finalist for multiple awards, including the Book Pipeline Contest, Bridge Eight Fiction Prize, and Fiction Five Award.
* Writing informed by personal experiences with chronic illness, grief, and depression, lending authenticity to the narrative.
* Poet and public interest lawyer with a history of impactful, multidisciplinary work.

**Themes and Reader Impact:**

* Provides insightful perspectives on complicated grief and mental health, resonating with readers facing similar challenges.
* Appeals to diverse audiences, including those interested in animal stories, LGBTQ+ representation, and climate-related themes.
* Offers educational value, recommended for mental health professionals, educators, and book clubs.

**Other Highlights:**

* Beta readers described it as a page-turner despite its serious themes.
* Rich, multidimensional characters ensure broad reader connection.
* Published by Bancroft Press, an established independent publisher (Top 10 indie since 1992) with a history of acclaimed titles.

**Normalizing Non-Binary Representation in Literary Fiction**

In a literary landscape where stories about gender identity often focus on conflict or self-discovery, Michelle Lerner’s *RING* offers a refreshing and groundbreaking approach. The novel features a non-binary main character whose identity is not the centerpiece of the narrative. Instead, their non-binary identity is seamlessly woven into the fabric of their existence—acknowledged but not problematized, represented without sensationalism.

This approach sets *RING* apart as one of the few works of literary fiction to present a non-binary character in a way that normalizes and affirms their identity without making it the focal point of the story. By treating the character’s gender as a natural part of who they are rather than a plot device, Lerner achieves an authenticity that resonates deeply with readers seeking representation that reflects the diversity of human experience.

*RING* offers a narrative that is universal in its themes yet specific in its inclusivity. It invites all readers—regardless of gender identity—to connect with its characters and explore its rich emotional landscapes. This distinctive portrayal makes *RING* not just a compelling read but an important cultural milestone in literary fiction.

For readers, critics, and institutions committed to expanding the scope of representation in literature, *RING* provides an example of how diverse identities can be normalized and celebrated without being diminished or overshadowed. It’s a novel that invites conversation and connection while paving the way for more inclusive storytelling.

**Overview of Complicated Grief**

**Complicated grief**, also known as **prolonged grief disorder (PGD)**, is an intense and persistent form of grief that goes beyond the typical mourning process. It occurs when someone struggles to adapt to the loss of a loved one, leading to prolonged emotional pain, difficulty accepting the death, and an inability to engage in normal life activities. Complicated grief often includes:

* Intense longing or preoccupation with the deceased.
* Avoidance of reminders of the loss.
* Difficulty finding meaning or moving forward in life.
* Persistent feelings of emptiness, anger, or numbness.

Unlike normal grief, which typically subsides with time and support, complicated grief persists for more than 6-12 months and significantly impairs functioning.

**Prevalence in the U.S.**

The prevalence of complicated grief in the U.S. varies depending on the population studied. Research indicates that **7-10% of bereaved individuals develop complicated grief**. Since millions of Americans experience the loss of a loved one annually, it is estimated that **1.5-3 million people** may experience complicated grief in any given year.

**Risk Factors**

Risk factors for developing complicated grief include:

* Sudden, unexpected, or traumatic loss.
* Close relationships with the deceased (e.g., spouses, children).
* History of mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety.
* Lack of social support or ongoing stressors.

If you or someone you know is experiencing symptoms of complicated grief, it’s important to seek professional help, as therapy (e.g., grief counseling or cognitive-behavioral therapy) has been shown to be effective.

**Awareness of Complicated Grief Among the Afflicted**

Many individuals experiencing **complicated grief** may not recognize it as a distinct condition. They often attribute their intense and persistent grief to personal failure, weakness, or a natural response to loss. Without awareness of **prolonged grief disorder (PGD)** as a diagnosable condition, they may:

* Normalize their suffering, believing it’s just part of grieving.
* Feel isolated or ashamed, thinking they should have "moved on."
* Not connect their symptoms (e.g., numbness, avoidance, or intense yearning) with a treatable issue.

**Percentage Seeking Professional Help**

The percentage of those with complicated grief who seek professional help is relatively low. Estimates suggest:

* **Less than 50%** of individuals experiencing complicated grief seek therapy or counseling.
* Among those who do seek help, some may enter therapy for symptoms like depression or anxiety without realizing their root problem is prolonged grief.
* Barriers to seeking help include stigma, lack of knowledge about the condition, and difficulty accessing mental health care.

**Awareness Among the General Population**

Your hunch that very few Americans know about complicated grief is likely accurate. Studies indicate that:

* Public awareness of **prolonged grief disorder** is minimal, even though it was officially added to the DSM-5-TR in 2022.
* The concept of "stuck" or "complicated" grief may resonate with some people, but they often don’t recognize it as a clinical condition.
* Mental health literacy overall remains low in the U.S., with many people unaware of specific mental health disorders unless they or someone they know is directly affected.

**Why Awareness is So Low**

* Grief is often considered a deeply personal experience, leading to reluctance to medicalize or pathologize it.
* Cultural norms may pressure individuals to "be strong" or "get over it," discouraging open conversations about ongoing struggles.
* Mental health education and outreach rarely include prolonged grief disorder, focusing instead on conditions like depression, anxiety, or PTSD.

**How to Increase Awareness**

* **Public campaigns**: Similar to initiatives for depression or anxiety, campaigns could highlight prolonged grief as a treatable condition.
* **Education for healthcare providers**: Many primary care doctors, who are often the first point of contact, may not recognize complicated grief or know when to refer a patient to mental health specialists.
* **Community and cultural engagement**: Integrating discussions of prolonged grief into workplaces, schools, and community centers could help normalize the condition and encourage those affected to seek help.

**The Numbers**

* **Afflicted**: 1.5–3 million Americans annually.
* **Seeking help**: Likely fewer than 1–1.5 million.
* **General awareness**: Likely very low, with perhaps only a small percentage (under 10%) of the population aware of complicated grief as a clinical issue.

Increasing public unawareness is critical—this lack of knowledge contributes to unnecessary suffering and prevents many from accessing effective treatments.

***RING*’s Target Audience**

* RING appeals to a wide range of readers, including those who have experienced grief or depression, LGBTQ2S+ community for nonbinary representation, lovers of philosophical literary fiction, and enthusiasts of animal stories.
* It also has cross-border appeal due to its American protagonist and Canadian setting​
* RING is particularly suitable for book clubs with a literary or political focus, especially those including middle-aged and/or LGBTQ2S+ readers​

**Comparable Titles**

* In structure, "RING" is akin to Jenny Offill's "Weather," while in concept, it resembles Sigrid Nunez's "The Friend." It also draws influences from various works in fiction and non-fiction, offering a unique literary perspective​

**Overview of *RING***

*Ring* takes you on an unforgettable odyssey through the depths of human emotion, from the hollows of grief to the heights of newfound hope. In the backdrop of a snow-covered sanctuary designed to aid the dying, Lee, a middle-aged non-binary individual from the Midwest, grapples with the unbearable weight of losing their young daughter. Abandoning their previous life and even the comfort of a longtime spouse, Lee is driven by a quest for closure—or an end to it all.

Enter Ring, a seemingly ordinary dog with an extraordinary role. Owned by Robert, a terminally ill man preparing to make his final walk through the sanctuary's Seven Pillars, Ring becomes the catalyst for Lee's own rebirth. As Lee befriends other souls at the sanctuary, each embroiled in their own battles—from Catherine and Samu, the spiritual leaders, to Viviana, a war veteran scarred by trauma—they are nudged toward a revelation that challenges their initial reasons for coming to this remote haven.

The novel deftly weaves themes of loss, hope, and healing, set against the spirituality-infused environment of the sanctuary. It presents a compassionate view on suicide, grappling with the complex questions it raises about the value and sanctity of life. As Lee engages with mindfulness practices and meditation, the story emerges as an enlightening guide for anyone walking the fine line between despair and hope.

Don't miss this emotional journey. It tackles the raw, intricate facets of grief, and leaves you pondering the restorative powers of companionship and the human spirit. Ideal for readers coping with loss, struggling with suicidal thoughts, or seeking a deeply spiritual narrative, *Ring* promises to resonate long after the last page is turned.

**Eight Reasons to Read and Review RING**

**1. Profound Meditation Wrapped in a Gripping Plot**: "RING" is celebrated for its rare fusion of an engaging plot with the depth of a profound meditation. This novel not only captivates with its storyline but also offers deep, introspective insights, making it a significant read for those interested in exploring themes of grief, healing, and spiritual growth​​.

2. **Universal Themes of Grief and Healing**: The novel addresses universal experiences of loss, grief, and the search for healing in a manner that resonates with a wide audience. It explores these themes through a unique lens, offering catharsis and understanding to readers navigating their own journeys of sorrow and recovery​​.

3. **Diverse and Relatable Characters**: "RING" features a diverse cast of characters, each grappling with their personal tragedies and healing in their own ways. This variety ensures that almost any reader can find a piece of themselves within the pages, fostering a deep connection with the narrative​​.

4. **Visual and Atmospheric Setting**: The remote sanctuary setting and the symbolic journey of walking the pillars provide a backdrop that is ripe for visual storytelling. The vivid descriptions of the environment and the atmospheric quality of Lerner's writing invite readers into a sensory experience that enhances the emotional impact of the story​​.

5. **Critical Acclaim**: The novel has garnered praise from notable authors and literary figures, highlighting Lerner’s exceptional writing, her insightful exploration of complex themes, and the novel’s emotional depth and narrative elegance​​.

6. **Inspiration from True Experiences and Multifaceted Research**: Lerner’s background as a poet, lawyer, and chronic illness survivor enriches the novel with a blend of personal experience, thorough research, and a deep understanding of human psychology and spirituality. This authenticity adds layers of meaning and relatability to the story​​.

7. **Educational Value on Mental Health and Healing**: "RING" provides insightful perspectives on mental health, suicide prevention, and the healing process. It's recommended for educators, healthcare professionals, and anyone interested in a deeper understanding of these critical issues, offering valuable insights into the power of community and connection in the face of hardship​​.

8. **A Journey Toward Hope and Resilience**: At its core, "RING" is a story of transformation—from despair to hope, from isolation to connection. It invites readers on a journey that mirrors the protagonist’s path to healing, suggesting that even in the deepest grief, there is potential for renewal and growth​​.

**Press Release**

**From Chronic Illness to Literary Triumph: Michelle Lerner's Inspiring Journey and the Making of *Ring***

La Crescenta, CA—Michelle Lerner’s journey from battling the debilitating effects of chronic illness to writing her debut novel *Ring* is as remarkable as the story within its pages. Published by Bancroft Press, *Ring* is a transformative exploration of grief, hope, and healing that has already garnered critical acclaim. Comparable to works like *Without Jenny* and *Take Me with You*, *Ring* offers readers a profound meditation on loss and resilience through a deeply personal lens.

Michelle’s own personal story begins with an undiagnosed case of neurological Lyme disease that forced her to abandon a thriving career as a public interest lawyer. During the years of physical and social isolation that followed, Michelle discovered solace and purpose in writing. Drawing from her own experiences with trauma and the mind-body connection, she created *Ring*, a narrative that resonates with universal themes of grief and the power of human connection.

“Practically every other time I communicate with Michelle, she’s overcoming another physical challenge,” says Bruce L. Bortz, publisher at Bancroft Press. “It’s amazing to me that she managed to write such a beautiful, life-affirming book despite these obstacles. Michelle embodies the resilience she writes about, and her ability to turn personal hardship into art is nothing short of inspiring.”

Set in a remote sanctuary for the dying, *Ring* follows Lee, a non-binary parent grappling with the devastating loss of their child. As Lee connects with others at the sanctuary, including a dog named Ring, the novel weaves a compelling narrative about navigating life’s darkest moments and finding hope again. The setting’s stark beauty and spiritual undertones amplify the emotional depth of the story, making it a page-turner that is also a meditation on life’s fragility and resilience.

Michelle’s personal experiences not only inform the novel’s narrative but also add authenticity to its exploration of themes like the mind-body connection and healing through community. *Ring* delves into universal questions about grief, resilience, and what it means to heal, while also providing a rare representation of non-binary perspectives in contemporary fiction.

Beyond the book, Michelle has embraced her role as an advocate for chronic illness awareness, LGBTQ+ representation, and mental health. Her story underscores the importance of perseverance and creativity in the face of adversity, offering a beacon of hope for others navigating similar struggles.

“Michelle’s background as a poet and lawyer lends *Ring* a unique voice, blending lyrical prose with deeply philosophical undertones,” says Bortz. “Her experiences with chronic illness have given her a profound understanding of resilience, and that wisdom shines through in her writing.”

**Critical Acclaim for *Ring***

* **“**The reader is taken step-by-step through this powerful story with deep lessons on grief, life, and suicide. Not an easy read, but one that is ultimately uplifting.” **– *Booklist*, Starred Review**
* “Somber and emphatic, *Ring* is a breathtaking novel that muses through the complications of grief via a parent learning how to live through it.”**—Foreword Reviews**
* “A beautiful story of a journey fueled by grief and steeped in love. The pages turned themselves for me**.”—Amy B. Scher, Bestselling Author**
* “Unique and powerful, *Ring* is a stunning, hypnotic book**.”—Ellen Pall, Author of *Must Read Well***
* “Haunting…Transformative...Hopeful…Unforgettable.”**—Publishers Weekly**
* “A profound exploration of grief, renewal, and cultural identity…With psychological depth and themes of resilience, it’s a powerful, thought-provoking read for book clubs and libraries.”**—Midwest Book Review**

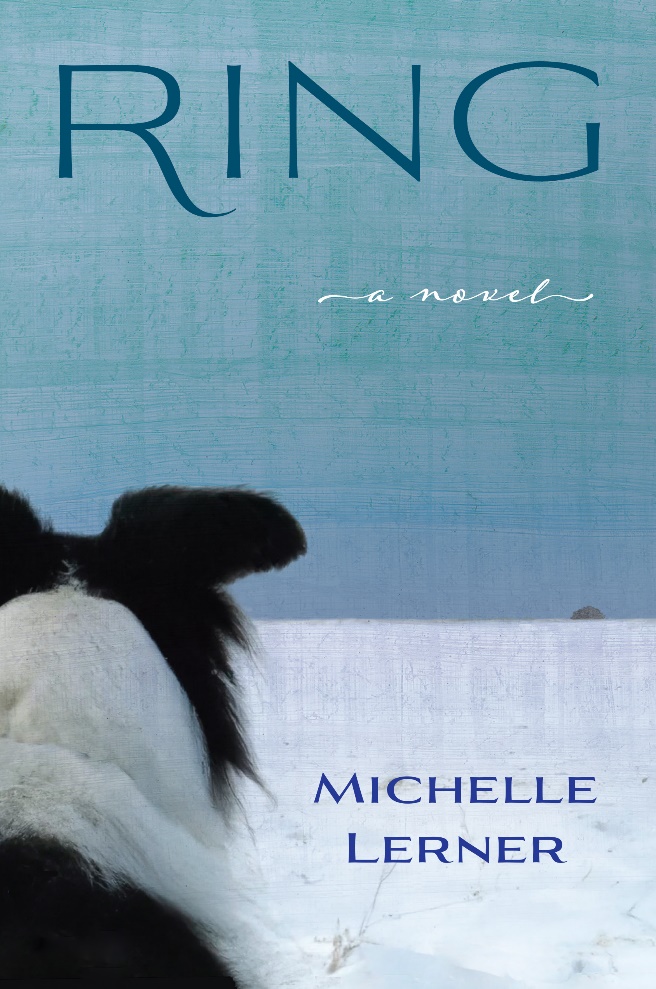
**About Bancroft Press** Bancroft Press is a leading independent publisher dedicated to bringing unique and thought-provoking works to a broad audience. Founded in 1992, the press has published works by Pulitzer Prize winners and national bestsellers.

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Visit www.bancroftpress.com for more information about *Ring* and upcoming releases.

**Praise for Michelle Lerner’s Debut Novel *Ring***

"It's rare for a novel so well-equipped with the bones and muscle of plot to feel like a profound meditation, but this is exactly what Michelle Lerner's *RING* felt like to me. Lerner's wisdom about the world seems rooted in her previous work as a poet and public interest lawyer—as well as her experience with chronic illness—but the powers of observation here and the sensitivity of expression made me feel like she was channeling some otherworldly inspiration and transmitting it to us. The spiritual traditions explored here are as lovingly researched as they are artfully rendered—our own journey ends up mirroring the healing sought in these pages. For anyone who has been through the trauma of physical and mental illness, who has yearned for sanctuary across many cultures, who has turned to the animal world to tend to our human anguishes, who longs for a model of turning loss into hope, *RING* is truly a balm for the psyche. I will never forget this beautiful book."

**—Porochista Khakpour, Author of the Memoir *Sick* and Other Books**

*“RING*, by Michelle Lerner, is a haunting and deeply moving exploration of a mother’s journey through the aftermath of unimaginable loss. Lerner’s poignant prose captures the raw intensity of grief and the quiet, transformative power of resilience. Following the heartbreaking death of her daughter, Lee embarks on a soul-searching pilgrimage to the remote Seven Pillars Sanctuary, a haven for weary souls navigating the end of life. There, amid an atmosphere rich in spiritual guidance, Lee confronts the profound question of what it means to live beyond the weight of grief. With her delicately crafted characters, Lerner delivers a narrative where pain and healing coalesce, showing how a parent’s all-consuming sorrow can evolve into an unexpected awakening. In the company of other sanctuary inhabitants—and through a bond with a dog named Ring that symbolizes both the past and a glimmer of hope for the future—Lee’s journey toward forgiveness, gratitude, and renewed purpose unfolds in achingly beautiful detail. Comparisons to Mark Gunther’s *Without Jenny* and Catherine Ryan Hyde’s *Take Me With You* underscore the novel’s thematic depth and emotional resonance. Lerner’s *RING* offers readers an unforgettable portrait of loss, resilience, and the fragile thread between despair and hope—a must-read for anyone who has grappled with the complexities of love and sorrow.”

**—BookLife/Publishers Weekly**

“A beautiful story of a journey fueled by grief and steeped in love. The pages turned themselves for me.”   
**—Amy B. Scher, bestselling author of *This Is How I Save My Life***

“As the editor of a literary magazine, I love the opportunity to champion novel excerpts. I remember reading *Ring* for the first time. I was immediately immersed in its world, transported to this cold, insular place—a sanctuary both comforting and fraught. The characters all felt so precise, united by grief, but singular in their expressions of it. Lee’s grief in particular pulsated through those pages, even as its exact source was a mystery. I was enthralled, and excited by the questions the book raised about community and care. I could tell the novel would be a published book, and I was thrilled to bring a small piece of it to *Shenandoah*’s readers. Of all of the novel excerpts we’ve published, this remains one of my favorites, and I'm even more thrilled now that the book is out in the world.”

**—Beth Staples, Editor, *Shenandoah***

“Ring: A Novel" by Michelle Lerner delves into themes of grief, suicide, and renewal, offering a powerful narrative for those dealing with unresolved personal issues. The story follows Lee, a grieving non-binary parent seeking solace after the loss of their only child, Rachel. The novel shifts perspectives between Lee and Rachel, creating a deep understanding of their experiences. Lee's journey intertwines with the fate of Ring, a dog brought to a sanctuary by a man intending to end both their lives. This encounter challenges Lee's views on suicide and grief. The novel also explores the cultural and social issues faced by First People residents at Attawapiskat, enriching the story with broader themes. Lerner's delicate narrative provides psychological insights and atmospheric influences of Canadian culture, making *Ring* a thought-provoking read for book clubs and psychology groups, and a valuable recommendation for libraries.”

**—Midwest Book Review**

“A deeply moving and emotional story about the human experience and finding closure.”

**—Princeton Alumni Weekly**

“In her spare, elegant, deeply emotional novel, Michelle Lerner takes the reader on a tortuous journey of the heart—the journey of a parent in the aftermath of their daughter’s sudden death. The measured restraint of the writing only makes the book more moving, and as the grieving parent seeks a final cure for their pain, we willingly follow them into the frozen reaches of northernmost Canada. Unique and powerful, *Ring* is a stunning, hypnotic book.”

**—Ellen Pall, Author of the Acclaimed Novel *Must Read Well***

“Michelle Lerner's background as a poet illuminates both the language and story arc of *Ring*, a novel about recovery after wrenching loss. From the name of the title character, the dog Ring (whose recurring presence acts as a bell slowly tolling to draw the protagonist back to life) to the pitch-perfect descriptions of an icy retreat, this meditation on sorrow shines with well-crafted sentences that feel as if the author is singing you the song of life and death. Lerner doesn't hide her environmental sensibilities in this tale, as she leads the reader through a New Age camp for those pondering whether to continue or to stop their personal journeys. At times dark and unsettling, *Ring* ultimately pulls readers to the brilliant glow of the Northern Lights.”

**—Libby Sternberg, Author of the Novel *Daisy***

“With care and sensitivity, Lerner’s gripping book *Ring* takes readers on a journey into Northern Canada to address grief, mental health, suicide, and healing. All too often, the James Bay region is depicted in a bleak portrait, with media coverage highlighting images of despair. In contrast, *Ring* offers strength in connection to the landscapes and more-than-human worlds that animate the main character’s grieving process and healing journey. The emotional depth of this novel appears in each sensory detail—the crunch of snow, the taste of cleansing meals, and the touch of companionship to confront feelings of alienation. Readers wanting to learn more about the shadows of loss against the backdrop of Canadian colonialism and the brilliant light of community life when confronting hardship will be inspired and moved by this book. It belongs in the hands of teachers, health professionals, and anyone ready to envision and enact brighter worlds.”

**—Sarah Marie Wiebe, Author of *Life against States of Emergency***

“Crippled by the grief of losing a child, Lee grapples with existence, the ability to put one foot in front of the other, and to keep on living. Lee thinks the answer is a fictional sanctuary in the snowy wilderness of Northern Ontario. The story is lyrically told, inventively crafted, and beautiful. It includes an exploration of different ways to treat deep depression and our connection to the earth and each other. Haunting and inspiring, immersive and uplifting, RING will stay with you long after you turn the final page.”

**—Debra Whittall, Former Radio News Anchor, Ontario, Canada**

“My god, what a beautiful meditation on grief and the way loss deeply embeds itself into every little fiber of our being. Lerner does such an incredible job here of approaching the topic of loss, especially loss by suicide, in a way that is raw and unflinching without sacrificing compassion.   
I did have the ever-so-slightest hang-up trying to gain momentum when starting this book, but once becoming familiar with the narrator’s voice, it was difficult to put RING down. There's something both haunting and comforting in the way Lerner is able to portray the nuances of grief and paint grieving humans in the most humane of ways. As a mental health worker and mental health advocate, I'm very eager to be able to pick up a physical copy of RING in January and add it to my shelf of other books about grief and loss.”

**—Brooke Kiebe, Mental Health Worker & Advocate**

“There are books we choose to read for the pleasure of inhabiting another person’s life, and then there are books that slowly pull us into another life, one that on the surface, and beneath it as well, that we can sympathize with, possibly relate to, but know we will remember long after the last page is read. For many, perhaps most, this is why we read. Set predominantly in a Canadian sanctuary called Seven Pillars, RING is a story of family, of love and loss, of trauma, grief, of searching for something that will fill the empty places inside us, and perhaps finding a way to move through the pain, misunderstandings, and loss… of finding the people (or dog) who love and help us and share our journey. All five stars for this profoundly moving and lovely read with themes of trauma, loss, hope and healing.”

**—Cheri Stephens, NetGalley Reviewer**

“In *Ring*, Michelle Lerner’s riveting and moving novel, a non-binary parent who has lost their beloved daughter travels to a remote sanctuary in northern Ontario, Canada to prepare themself spiritually to walk into the desolate, snow-covered landscape and end their life. At the sanctuary, they learn various practices that will help them to have a meaningful, conscious death if they decide to go through with it. Compulsively readable and highly recommended.”

**—Jeanne Winer, Author of *Her Kind of Case*, a Novel Which Received Starred Reviews from *Kirkus*, *Booklist*, and *Library Journal***

“Brave to tackle such taboo topics, Lerner skillfully weaves together diverse perspectives in this fictional exploration of severe depression and assisted suicide/guided transitioning. The cultural diversity is beautifully represented, and the inclusion of the dog featured on the cover is integral to the story. This book has the potential to lead many readers and book groups into open discussions on tough and important themes.”

**—Sid Sibo, Award-Winning Author and Animal Advocate**

“Grief, depression, and suicide are all touch on in this novel from poet Michelle Lerner. It features a nonbinary person from the Midwest and a very special dog.”

**—Autostraddle, a Digital Publication and Real-Life Community for Multiple Generations of LGBTQIA+ Humans (and Their Friends)**

*“Ring*, a debut novel by Michelle Lerner, is a deeply moving and extraordinary work of LGBTQIAP+ literary fiction. The story, set at a healing retreat in Canada called "The Seven Pillars," follows Lee, a middle-aged non-binary person grappling with the loss of their young adult daughter, Rachel. The novel beautifully explores themes of grief, healing, and the search for closure. The atmospheric setting, coupled with transformative character interactions, adds depth to the narrative. With its profound emotional resonance and wisdom, *Ring* stands out as an unforgettable read, perfect for book clubs and further exploration of its rich themes. One of the 22 best books I read in 2024.”

**—Elyse Walters, a top-rated Goodreads reviewer and staff reviewer for two independent bookstores**

“A riveting novel of a non-binary parent grieving their beloved daughter and preparing spiritually to end their life in the frozen, desolate landscape of Northern Canada. Among these dark contemplations, Michelle's moving prose proves a [balm for the psyche](https://michellelerner.net/ring/) that carries the reader to a sanctuary between despair and hope.”

**— Harvard Alumni Association**

"A stunning meditation on grief, *Ring* dives deep into the fibers of loss, exploring its raw edges and unflinching truths with unparalleled compassion. Lerner’s portrayal of grief, particularly from suicide, is haunting yet profoundly humane. As a mental health worker and advocate, I’m eager to add this remarkable book to my shelf."  
**— Brooke Eg Storm, MS, LIMHP**

“One of the more unique novels we've had the pleasure of reviewing.”

**—Book Pipeline, which reviews more than 30,000 scripts, books, plays, and short films annually, serving as a filter to supply its extensive network of film and TV executives with numerous clients and projects**

“With honest, illuminating prose, Lerner imbues the forbidding landscape of the sanctuary—a place for ending one's life—with dignity and warmth. *Ring* asks big questions and doesn't shy away from the brutal truths they reveal. This book clutched my heart and would not let it go.”

**—Jonathan Vatner, Author of the acclaimed novels *Carnegie Hill* and *The Bridesmaids Union***

"RING by Michelle Lerner is a stunning meditation on grief—how it can paralyze us, what helps us heal, and the power of the simplest forms of human connection. Set in an unconventional sanctuary in the remote tundra of Western Canada, this extraordinary novel explores deep moral and ethical dilemmas without easy answers, drawing us into the emotional landscape of its main character, Lee. Lerner masterfully immerses the reader in Lee’s scattered mind and numbed body as they grieve their daughter, and we are invited to heal right alongside them—thanks in great part to the titular character, a wonderful dog named Ring. The novel’s beautifully drawn setting, singular characters, and healing rituals make it unforgettable. As intense as this book is, it is ultimately full of hope and inspiration. I read it in one huge gulp because I was so invested!"

**—Katherine E. Sherbrooke, Author, *The Hidden Life of Aster Kelly***

“At its core, Ring explores the processes of grief and healing—but it is also so much more. It’s a complex story of an individual’s struggle to extinguish their grief, transporting readers to the far reaches of the Canadian tundra and bringing them along on a profound journey of self-awareness and growth. This carefully researched book thoughtfully engages with relevant and important topics, including immigration, otherness, justice, and forgiveness. Ring is a must-read for anyone seeking to deepen their understanding of themselves and the world beyond their everyday lives.”

**—Wendy Swift, Author of *A Dream Life***

“RING is a deeply insightful portrait of grief that also manages to be a pageturner… As I read RING, I was constantly drawn in by the perceptiveness of observation, the empathy, and my desire to learn more about the protagonist Lee and their journey. Though the topic might suggest a slow literary novel–and though it is beautifully written–RING constantly kept me turning the pages. This is a wonderful novel for people who think and feel deeply, for people interested in grief and healing, and for anyone who wants to read a meaningful story about what it means to live and love.”

**—Emmeline Chang, Reviewer for ACM (Another Chicago Magazine) and the Asian American Writers Workshop**

**Q&A with Author Michelle Lerner**

* What inspired you to write "Ring," and how does it reflect your personal experiences with chronic illness?

My inspiration to write “Ring” initially stemmed from my experience with complicated grief when I was younger. On and off for a few decades, I thought about writing a story about a person struggling so much with grief that they consider ending their own life, because having that feeling, that impetus, is a common facet of complicated grief.

So the vague contours of the story were there years before I became chronically ill: the sanctuary in the snow, the dog unknowingly brought into a life or death situation, and the dilemma that the dog’s presence poses to the main character. The story was about teasing A person with brown hair and a green shirt

Description automatically generatedout what moves the needle on a person’s internal barometer regarding their ability to go on after significant loss.

But I did not sit down (or sometimes lie down!) to actually write the story until I was several years into a chronic illness triggered by a too-long-undiagnosed case of neurological Lyme Disease. The main reason I didn’t start writing before my illness was that I was too busy. I was a public interest lawyer and always focused on cases and projects, and I never put aside the time to write anything for myself that was longer than a poem or an Op Ed. When I became too sick to work on deadline but recovered enough to write small amounts at a time, even if from bed, I realized I could begin writing this story.

At that point, I was experiencing a sense of physical and social isolation due to being sick. I had also discovered, in my attempts to recover from my illness, a range of healing modalities that calm the nervous system and release trauma stored in the body. The relief I felt from these modalities, and from learning to understand the mind-body connection, gave me another entry point to the story.

* Your previous work as a poet and public interest lawyer brings a unique perspective to your fiction writing. How do you feel these roles have influenced the narrative and thematic depth of "Ring"?

Both likely influenced how short and spare the novel is. In general, I usually overwrite and then need to edit down. Except with poetry, and except with legal prose, both of which are very compact forms of writing. I think my background in poetry led to me writing the novel in vignettes instead of chapters, and to the moody and descriptive nature of the narrative and its tendency to invoke emotion through observations of seemingly small things—a gesture, a pause, an inhalation, a change in the weather.

My legal background led me to think always of the bigger issues evoked by the story. And, probably, the dialogue—there is a lot of dialogue that picks apart philosophical and emotional questions and examines their logic. I think that’s likely very influenced from my training and practice as a public interest lawyer.

* "Ring" intricately weaves themes of loss, hope, and healing. Can you talk about the research or personal introspection that went into exploring these complex topics?

A lot of what may seem like researched material actually came out of my own experiences with loss, depression, and searching for spiritual meaning and healing. A lot of the odd therapies described are things I actually tried, some of which I continue to use. A lot of the dialogue is, in a sense, conversations I’ve had with myself.

I have done a lot of reading that is relevant to the discussions of trauma, loss, and healing in the book, and some of that reading is listed in the further resources section at the end. In particular, I’ve read a lot about the mind-body connection in the processing of trauma, from writers like Gabor Matè, Bessel van der Kolk, Amy Scher, and Bernie Siegal. I also tried to read various material about the philosophy around suicide and prevention of suicide, such as Jennifer Michael Hecht’s *Stay.*

Something I researched a lot was the material connected to Attawapiskat, the real Cree community situated near the land on which most of the fictional story takes place. I wanted my portrayal to be accurate, culturally competent, and based not on mainstream media depictions of the community but rather on first-person accounts and interviews with people who actually live there. In addition, I paid multiple sensitivity readers to evaluate those sections of the book and give me feedback.

* The protagonist, Lee, embarks on an emotional odyssey that is both deeply personal and universally relatable. What was your process for developing such a multi-dimensional character?

Lee actually entered my mind fully formed. It’s hard to explain to anyone who doesn’t write fiction—and I had a hard time understanding it myself until I encountered other fiction writers who have similar processes—but Lee seemed like a person I was observing. I often felt that Lee was telling me what to write, rather than my telling Lee what to think or say or do in my writing. I suspect Lee in part developed from a particular feeling I had watching the actor/comedian Tig Notaro in her limited series, ONE MISSISSIPPI. That character had a specific mix of despair and resilience, strength and vulnerability, depression and dry humor, and it was exhibited in the context of a trip taken to make sense of a recent loss. Lee is definitely not that character, but was in some sense influenced by that character.

I also tried to combine in Lee some of my personality traits with some of the traits my spouse has—qualities that sometimes put us in conflict with one another emotionally. By merging some of these qualities into one person, it allowed me to try to understand those qualities, and us as people, from a different perspective.

Sometimes writing characters, for me, is about trying to understand someone or something. One example is Susan, Lee’s spouse. Susan is Jewish, and anxious, straightforward, and action-oriented. Lee is both in awe of her and irritated and put off by her. They love each other, but they also alienate each other, especially in the way they cope with grief. I’m in an interethnic marriage where I’m the anxious, action-oriented Jew (but also the one who gets depressed!) and I took the writing of Lee’s character, and Susan’s, as an opportunity to try to put myself in my spouse’s shoes a little bit and see my tendencies from the outside, from the place of stunned bewilderment where my spouse often seems to land.

* The novel sets a profound meditation against a plot-driven backdrop. How did you balance these elements to maintain reader engagement throughout?

While there is movement in the plot—travel of various sorts—most of the action is emotional and psychological. The tension—the feeling that makes the reader want to turn the page—is largely psychological tension.

Because of the slow and meditative quality of the book, I was actually surprised when all of my beta readers, and my agent, called the book “a page-turner.” I think I actually laughed out loud the first time someone called it that. But if you think about it, even in the most action-oriented books or movies, the most heightened sense of tension often comes from the emotions that the characters feel and, in turn, cause the reader to feel.

I had a natural tendency, while writing the novel, to end most sections either on a note of emotional suspense or tension or a moment of emotional release. I think it is this ebb and flow that maintains the reader engagement. Along with, of course, the overarching question of what Lee and other characters will decide to do.

* Environmental sensibilities and the spiritual connection to nature play significant roles in "Ring." Could you share your inspiration for incorporating these elements into the story?

I have two answers to this question.

The first is that I myself feel a spiritual connection to nature and think it’s necessary to healing. It’s also something that people who do not spend a lot of time in nature often don’t understand, and I wanted to show it to them, not just tell them.

In terms of the specific natural environment, I’ve always felt a spiritual pull to vast northern spaces. And when I am in certain psychological states, these environments make sense to me. After I experienced a loss in my early 20’s, New Jersey experienced an ice storm that left everything covered in sheets of ice, to the extent that the trees and the roads appeared to be encased in glass. It was difficult to drive. It was difficult to walk. It lasted for weeks. And I felt a sense of real relief existing in this environment, because it matched my internal state, and the alignment made it easier to exist in the world. I don’t know if that’s when I started associating the landscapes and language of winter with the internal freeze and thaw that happen after great loss, but I do have that association.

The second answer is quite different. After I had finished a draft of “Ring,” another writer sent me an article encouraging fiction writers to include climate change in their stories. Because climate change is part of life now, and if we ignore it in our stories, it’s easier to ignore it in the world. And it’s not something we should ignore. I was ashamed to realize I’d written a whole novel that takes place in the subarctic and had not even mentioned, much less described, the impact of climate change there. So, I went back and wove it into the narrative, where it fits very naturally because, in a way, Lee is going through a type of internal climate change.

* Your ability to paint vivid scenes and evoke strong emotions with descriptive language is notable. Can you share some insights into how you approach the craft of writing to achieve such vividness?

I think very visually. When I read, I see the story inside my head like it’s a movie. When someone describes something to me, I see it. So, when I wrote the scenes in “Ring,” I was seeing them clearly in my head, with all of the attendant feelings, and just needed to pinpoint the language to convey it.

I also think that my training as a poet helps with this. I write “imagistically,” if that’s a word.

* The character of Ring, the dog, serves as a pivotal point in the novel. What does Ring symbolize in the journey of the protagonist and the larger narrative?

First, I want to take a little bit of issue with the idea that Ring is there as a symbol. For me, Ring is a fully-fledged character, with his own narrative arc and relationships.

That said, well, OK, Ring does also symbolize something. I actually thought my choice of name for him would make it clear, but so far only one reader has told me they figured that out. In group meditations, the person leading the meditation will often ring a small bell to start and finish the meditation practice, and sometimes during the practice. Part of the point of the bell is to bring us to our senses and the present moment, to remind us of why we are here, and to focus on our breath or whatever other point of focus we’re utilizing for our mind. I think Ring serves that purpose for Lee, bringing Lee back to the present moment and the realization of being a living being in the world, and the decisions and commitments that come with that realization.

* You’ve received praise for the authenticity of the spiritual traditions explored in the novel. How did you ensure these depictions were both respectful and accurate?

I don’t think I actually explored real spiritual traditions in “Ring.” It’s true that there is meditation and pranayama, which originated with the Vedas in ancient India, but I depicted those practices similarly to the way I was taught them in yoga studios and meditation classes, without much of their very important (and very real) spiritual and philosophical underpinnings. While yoga and meditation are common practices in the U.S. and Canada and much of the rest of the world at this point, they are often taught in a distinctly non-religious manner in these places. I understand that they originated elsewhere and hope I was respectful about that.

It's also true, I guess, that a lot of the instruction and contemplation at the sanctuary are based in part on my understanding of certain Buddhist principles. My spouse is Buddhist and I’ve studied Buddhism in small ways throughout my adult life. However, while there may be Buddhist echoes throughout the book, the spiritual teachings of the sanctuary and its particular combination of practices and principles are made up. I invented a religion for the story. A religion that draws from other (real) religions, but that is nonetheless made up. I would not want the dialogue in the book to be mistaken for actual Buddhist teachings.

While there is nothing at the sanctuary that is Jewish in practice (except maybe Samu’s inexplicable donning of something akin to a yarmulke), there is some discussion of Jewish grief rituals. I did not need to research that because I’m Jewish and my own family has practiced those rituals. And they’re rituals I find very helpful for processing and surviving grief, and that I wish were not falling by the wayside for non-religious Jews like myself.

I think it’s an open question whether the characters in “Ring,” or I as their writer, engaged in any amount of appropriation regarding the practices and ideas that are loosely derived from the Vedas and Buddhism. If so, I hope it’s minimal and done in a loving and respectful manner. I certainly intended it to be loving and respectful. I depicted characters who put pieces of different traditions together with their own ideas in order to try to find a way to navigate life and death. And I guess that reflects my own approach to spirituality, and to survival, in our complicated world. Which is not to say that I agree with everything said and done at the imagined sanctuary.

* Grief is a central theme of your novel. In writing about such a sensitive topic, what did you hope to convey to readers who might be dealing with their own grief?

Most complicated griefs are not understood by anyone, not by the people in the mourner’s life and often not by the mourner themself. It’s my hope that *Ring* can serve as company for people experiencing this phenomenon, so that they know they’re not alone and that other people have asked the same questions they’re asking and struggled with the same decisions. And I hope that the book can convey some small flicker of light and hope, and the sense that in this world where everything is impermanent—and where losses resulting from such impermanence can be gut- wrenching—our emotional and psychological states are also impermanent. That to some extent survival is about learning to live in a state of uncertainty and incompletion. That daily life can feel very difficult to get through and yet still have meaning. And that living, and remembering, and taking action in our loved one’s name is how we serve them and maintain the relationship.

* The setting of a remote sanctuary is almost a character in itself within the novel. How did you go about creating such a compelling and atmospheric location?

It was important to me that the tone and the feel of the story be cold, quiet, and vast, yet also very confined in a way. Because that is what grief feels like. So, I wanted a very defined and limited indoor space where people spent most of their time, contrasted with a feeling of frozen vastness outside that space.

I had the image of a subarctic setting in my mind for this story. I’ve spent a little bit of time in subarctic terrain, though not in the exact location where this story is told. I also had the sense that Lee would start out from the Midwest U.S.. I then looked at a map and figured out where the most remote northern place was that someone from the Midwest U.S. could reasonably get to in real life, where there is an airport and also a way to get out to vast expanses of snowy land where someplace like the sanctuary could be hidden. I then researched that place—the ecosystems, the views, how the land is described by people who live there.

In terms of the sanctuary itself, I just saw it in my mind as I wrote it. I knew it needed to feel simple. Spare. Pared down to the necessities. Because that is also what living through grief can feel like.

• "Ring" has been described as a guide for those walking the line between despair and hope. How do you view the role of literature in providing solace or guidance?

Stories have the power to affect us on a very deep emotional level. And, I think that sometimes it’s easier to process our own pain and challenges when we allow ourselves to be absorbed in, and affected by, someone else’s.

When I first experienced complicated grief, I was desperate to read anything that made sense of what I was going through and gave me any sense of what to do about it. I tried to read psychology books and self-help books, and found no solace. They were cold, dry, impersonal, and prescriptive in a way that felt unhelpful.

What really helped me was finding two works of literature that approached this state of being in a more emotional, personal, and nonprescriptive manner. One was C.S. Lewis’ memoir, *A Grief Observed.* The other was the novella *Kitchen* by Banana Yoshimoto. Reading those books felt like meeting someone who understands exactly what I felt, and who struggled with it in messy and sometimes unresolved ways but still managed to go on. It felt like someone was holding out their hand to me and walking with me on what was otherwise a very lonely path.

* You’ve incorporated mindfulness practices and meditation into the narrative. How do these elements contribute to the overall message of the novel?

The overall message of the novel is, in some ways, that life goes on for the living. Even when it’s unpleasant. And that there’s a reason for this, or maybe many reasons. But to actually go on living, we need to experience the world around us, and experience our own bodies, which can be very difficult to do while in a traumatized emotional state. Mindfulness practices bring our attention back to the physical world and, to some extent, out of the endless ruminations we tend to engage in while depressed, anxious, or grieving. Becoming aware of your breath, and your feet on the floor, and the sounds in the room, and what your body is actually feeling, can short-circuit emotional states that otherwise feel permanent and unbearable.

These practices also remind us that we’re physical beings, and our emotions are stored in, and affect, our bodies. We can’t really address our emotional state without addressing our bodies and figuring out where in our bodies we’re holding on to trauma. Some of the most profound releases I’ve ever felt from both depression and anxiety have been through physical experiences like yoga, running, and EFT/tapping.

That said, I am very bad at following my own prescriptions. I go years sometimes without meditating or doing yoga. Writing *Ring* was to some extent a meditation for myself about meditation and mindfulness, a way of telling myself, over and over, to remember that this is what helps when nothing else seems to.

• The novel tackles the complex issue of suicide with compassion and depth. What challenges did you face in addressing this topic, and what message do you hope to impart?

The challenges, of course, have to do with worrying about the effects on the reader. People feel suicidal sometimes. Sometimes people act on it. I did not want to write anything that could make someone feel more likely to act on it.

On the other hand, the reticence around the subject, and people’s fear of talking about it, also doesn’t help. People who have these feelings will not stop having them simply because you avoid the subject. There is a sense of alienation inherent to suicidal ideation. Entering into a person’s line of vision, and sitting with them in that space, is, I think, more helpful. It’s hard to feel a part of the world and yet keep falling deeper into that kind of ideation, unless there is a great deal of physical distress or threat of physical distress.

There was a Robin Williams movie many years about the afterlife. It wasn’t a fantastic movie. But there is one part I will always remember, in which his character goes into a dark distant place to find his wife who had taken her own life. She’s so stuck inside her own ruminations that she can’t hear or see him. So, he decides to just stay in that place with her until he starts to lose his own mind. And that is when she suddenly regains awareness and is able to emerge. When she feels him there with her. Reaching in from the outside with logic and pleas didn’t work. He had to be willing to acknowledge what she was actually feeling, and to brave sitting in that space.

Part of what I wanted to do with this book was sit down in that space with the reader. If it’s a reader who has never experienced suicidal ideation, maybe it will be an education and will allow them to understand and better support people who do.

If it’s a reader who has experienced it, or is even still experiencing it, I hope that spending time with a character who is willing to inhabit that space will provide some measure of relief and connection, some small step towards reemergence.

In terms of a message, I guess I hope to impart that living doesn’t necessarily mean getting *over* difficult things. It doesn’t necessarily mean ever getting to the point of feeling whole again. There are ways to manage grief and despair even as they stay with you, and there are reasons to do so. And the keys to understanding all of this, and to get by on a day-to-day basis, are to be present to the physical world and to focus on helping someone else.

* Your journey from law to fiction is fascinating. How do you think your background in law has influenced your storytelling, especially in dealing with themes of justice and morality?

I think that my background in law has, to some extent, made me a sparer storyteller. Legal writing is supposed to be concise. It was hard for me to learn to write that way, and every fiber of my being rebelled against it in the beginning. But I got used to doing it. And it taught me to really hone in on the most important details of any story, the details that are relevant to the overall picture, the point I’m trying to make. It also taught me how to be less wordy!

Probably no one but a lawyer would realize this, but there is a real-life legal parallel to the dilemma regarding the character of Ring. There are people who instruct in their wills that, on their death, their animals should be “euthanized.” In New Jersey, where I live, there’s been a bill pending for years that would make such clauses unenforceable. But the bill never even reaches a vote, much less passes, because there are forces that lobby against it, arguing that people should have the right to do this, that there might be reasons for doing so.

Most people are shocked to hear anyone would do this to their animal, and that anyone would fight such a bill, but it’s real. I run a cat rescue and we have a foster cat who was surrendered to us by a woman’s daughter after the woman died, despite the woman having instructed in her will that her daughter should get the cat “euthanized” (which I put in quotes because the cat was not sick). The daughter thankfully couldn’t get herself to do it.

I wanted to consider this situation outside the legal context of wills and decedents, and address the moral question in a more direct way. But the fact that I wanted to address it at all probably comes in part from having been a lawyer, and having recently practiced animal law at the time I wrote the book.

* The reception of "Ring" has been overwhelmingly positive, with mentions of its emotional impact and compelling storytelling. How has the response from readers and critics shaped your view of your own work?

I was worried that readers would find the book depressing and hard to get through. I was really surprised when people instead called it a page-turner and said they came away from it feeling hopeful and healed. I’m happy to hear these things, and it’s made me think of the book as less of a heavy object and more of the “balm” that Porochista Khakpour called it in her endorsement.

• Can you discuss any challenges you faced in transitioning from poetry and law to writing a full-length novel?

I found myself completely unable to write a normally structured novel with traditional chapters. I definitely think this came from being a poet. I think part of why it took me so long to write this story down is that I couldn’t really figure out how to do it in a “normal” way, with simple linearity, in-depth backstory, and complicated plot points.

When I finally jettisoned the idea that I had to write it in that way, and approached it structurally more like a poem, it flowed. It’s why it’s written in vignettes and why most of the vignettes center an emotion or sensation rather than a series of actions.

• With "Ring" delving into spirituality and the human connection to animals, can you share any personal beliefs or experiences that influenced these aspects of the story?

I definitely have a personal belief in, and a lot of personal experience with, the power of human-animal connections. Throughout my life, a lot of my most profound relationships have been with animals. I’ve been greatly comforted and even, I would say, healed by them. My soul mate throughout my childhood and early adulthood was a horse named Shire, and I’m not sure I’ve had as close a connection with anyone since. I’ve always lived with animals, and there is a cat purring next to me as I answer this question. My mother says that when she was pregnant with me, her cat Rhubarb would lay on her belly and purr. Perhaps that’s why purring is such a soothing sound for me.

In terms of the spirituality in “Ring,” I think it emanates from the connections people have to the land, the sky, and the humans and animals around them. And to being present with their bodies and with the natural world around them. And I guess this is the context in which I myself feel spiritual.

“Ring” also discusses ritual to some extent—the Jewish death rituals practiced after Lee’s daughter died, and the made-up rituals at the sanctuary. While I am not enamored with many aspects of organized religion, I do think that rituals are very important and can help us hold onto our sanity, especially in the wake of traumatic events. I find the Jewish mourning rituals that I grew up with to be profoundly helpful in the aftermath of death. I think that a lot of the alienation and disorientation in contemporary U.S. society is due to the falling away of these kinds of community rituals. When we don’t know what to do, sometimes having tried and true practices to fall back on, in the presence of community, makes all the difference.

• The sanctuary’s Seven Pillars play a crucial role in the narrative. Can you explain the significance of these pillars and how they came to be part of the story?

I’ll tell you a secret: I don’t know what all of the pillars are! I came up with a few of them that are mentioned early on in the novel, but I never bothered to define them all.

I don’t actually know where the idea for the pillars came from—either the physical pillars in the snow or the metaphorical pillars of the Society’s philosophy/religion. I think my first image of the story that entered my head decades ago was of a person walking in the snow with a dog toward a stone pillar. Why this particular image? I honestly don’t know. But figuring out what the pillar was for, and what it signified, helped me design a structure and setting for the story.

The pillars are important to the story in a number of ways. First, the explanation of the first few pillars allows some sense of the Sanctuary’s philosophy to be conveyed, as well as the instructions to Lee and the other residents as to what they need to do to find healing and peace. Second, they are a concrete manifestation of the connections between mind and body, theory and the physical world. Because they stand for both principles and physical columns in the snow. Part of the point of “Ring” is that nothing exists only in our minds or emotions. Everything is physical; everything is part of the world. The pillars are in our mind and are sticking out of the ground. Our emotions are in our mind and in every cell and organ of our bodies.

• Finally, what’s next for you as an author? Are there themes or stories you’re eager to explore in your future work?

Believe it or not, my next book is funny! It’s a collection of humorous stories about my life among animals, from my neurologically impaired squirrel to my physically disabled sheep to the six cats with feline leukemia I accidentally adopted. I’m about three-fourths of the way through writing it, though I’ve taken a break from it for the last few months.

I also have two other books waiting to be written. One is a novel about the Shakers, which I already have planned out and have done research for but keep putting off to write other things. Most people aren’t aware how truly radical the Shakers were. They were egalitarian in terms of both gender and race. They were communist with a small “c.” Their religious leader was a woman. They prohibited marriage, sex, and reproduction, and replenished their ranks by adopting orphans and raising them in the community. At the point of adulthood, they let the adoptees go out into the world and decide whether or not to remain a Shaker.

My story is about a young woman at this point in her life, deciding whether to remain a Shaker and have access to education, occupation, and leadership positions, or to live in the outside world and have the kind of family life afforded by marriage and childbearing. I want to explore the question of what we are willing to give up in order to fulfil our potential, and what that means in different contexts.

Also, after the demise of *Roe v. Wade*, I hope to explore the concept of women’s reproductive autonomy by considering the Shaker movement. The Shakers were started by a woman, Mother Anne, who suffered four still births and didn’t want to do that anymore. The Shakers became one of the only options for women who did not want to marry or bear children, and a very large percentage of every Shaker community at any given time were women of reproductive age. I think this is a story that needs to be told.

Finally, I have been working for the past couple of years with young Gazan writers, and since October I’ve been working to try to get them out of Gaza and into universities abroad so that they can finish their educations despite every university in Gaza being destroyed. I keep being told that I need to write a book about this effort. Stay tuned!

<https://paw.princeton.edu/tiger-of-the-week>

[**Tiger of the Week**](https://paw.princeton.edu/tiger-of-the-week)

**Turning From Law to Writing, Michelle Lerner ’93 Publishes First Novel**

‘If I had really had the wherewithal and given myself permission earlier, I could have done it earlier,’ Lerner says



Michelle Lerner ’93 researches her next book. (*Sinead Tuttle-Lerner)*



**By**[**Anna Mazarakis ’16**](https://paw.princeton.edu/bio/anna-mazarakis)

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2 min read

Michelle Lerner ’93 knows that it can be hard to make a career transition later in life. Yet with the publication of her debut novel, [*Ring*](https://www.amazon.com/Ring-Novel-Michelle-Lerner/dp/1610886283), this month, the former public interest lawyer says others shouldn’t wait to do the work they want to do.

Lerner began her writing career before arriving at Princeton — she acquired her first mentor, the poet Laura Boss, when she was 16. She then took poetry writing classes at Princeton with Paul Muldoon and Julie Agoos, and she was the editor of *Voices*, a women’s literary magazine. “What I had always actually wanted to do was be a writer, it just didn’t feel like a practical pursuit as a career,” she says.

Instead, inspired by student activism at the Women’s Center and against the first Iraq War, she decided to go to law school to work on the causes she cared about. As a public interest lawyer, she worked in impact litigation around disability rights, poverty, language access, environmental law, and animal protection law.

“The whole time I was a lawyer, I felt like it was temporary, but I never seemed able to extricate myself from it,” Lerner says, adding that she really believed in the work she was doing even though she didn’t like the job. “The more skills and experience I had, it became more and more difficult to just decide to stop doing it. I think this happens to a lot of people who are in careers that are maybe not what they think is their ideal career: You get more and more entrenched.”

She continued to submit poems to journals, and many were published. Then, as she continued to work full-time as a lawyer, she went back to school and graduated with an MFA in poetry the year of her 15th reunion. “But even then, I could not get myself to actually leave law,” she says.

Lerner finally was forced to step away from her legal work in the spring of 2016 when she was diagnosed with Neurological Lyme Disease after years of undiagnosed medical issues. She was bedridden for a year and a half, and when she was well enough to start working again, she turned to writing.

“I wanted to write something very realistic about depression and about grief,” Lerner says of the novel she began writing in 2019. *Ring* is about a person struggling with complicated grief after losing their adult child, and their journey to a sanctuary designed to help those who are dying. “While that sounds extremely heavy and dark, I’ve been told that the book is very psychologically uplifting and helpful and a page turner,” she says. “Honestly … I laughed the first time that I was told that.”

She is now working on her second book: “a creative nonfiction sort of memoir” about  animals she has cared for, including a neurologically impaired squirrel and a physically disabled sheep. She also continues to write poetry, and she has no plans to go back to practicing law.

“I think part of what I learned is I can do this, and if I had really had the wherewithal and given myself permission earlier, I could have done it earlier also,” Lerner says of her career transition. “I’m not sorry I did any of it. ...  I’m glad that I had the experience of doing the work that I did, and that I get to also have this second career focusing on what I wanted to focus on from the beginning.”

**20 Book Club Questions**

1. How do you interpret the novel's title, "RING," in the context of the story? What significance does Ring the dog hold for Lee and the other characters?
2. "RING" delves deeply into themes of grief and healing. How does the author portray the process of grieving differently through each character?
3. The setting of a remote sanctuary plays a crucial role in the story. How does the author use this setting to explore the themes of isolation and community?
4. Lee's journey is both physical and emotional. Discuss how their physical journey to and within the sanctuary mirrors their internal journey.
5. How does the diverse cast of characters enrich the narrative? Discuss how the inclusion of characters with varied backgrounds and experiences impacts the story's exploration of grief.
6. The novel incorporates elements of spirituality and nature. How do these aspects contribute to the characters' healing processes?
7. Michelle Lerner uses a spare, elegant writing style to tell this deeply emotional story. How does her writing style affect your reading experience and the emotional weight of the story?
8. Discuss the significance of the Seven Pillars in the sanctuary. How do these pillars represent different aspects of healing or coping with grief?
9. The concept of "walking the pillars" is central to the novel. How do you interpret this act, and what does it symbolize for the characters who consider or undertake it?
10. "RING" includes discussions on sensitive topics such as suicide and mental health. How does the author handle these themes with care and sensitivity?
11. The author's background as a poet and lawyer is evident in her writing. Can you identify elements in the novel that reflect her experiences in these fields?
12. Explore the role of animals, specifically Ring, in the healing process. How does Ring's presence affect Lee and other characters' journeys?
13. The novel suggests a strong connection between the physical environment and the characters' emotional states. Discuss examples of this connection and its impact on the narrative.
14. How does the novel's exploration of loss and healing compare with other books you've read on similar topics?
15. The sanctuary offers a blend of various spiritual and therapeutic practices. Discuss how these practices contribute to the novel's exploration of healing.
16. How does the novel address the impact of chronic illness, both on Michelle Lerner's writing process and within the story itself?
17. Discuss the dynamic between Lee and Susan, particularly how they cope with their daughter's death differently. What does this say about the nature of grief?
18. The novel challenges the characters to confront their deepest fears and desires. Discuss how these confrontations lead to personal growth or change.
19. "RING" weaves in themes of environmental consciousness and the effects of climate change. Discuss how these themes enhance the story and relate to the characters' experiences.
20. The ending of "RING" leaves readers with much to ponder. How did the ending affect you, and what do you believe is the takeaway message of the novel?

**About the Author**

Michelle Lerner is a multi-faceted talent whose journey has traversed the fields of law, poetry, and now fiction. She began her academic career at Princeton University, where she graduated summa cum laude in 1993 with an AB in Anthropology. She continued her education at Harvard Law School, earning her JD magna cum laude in 1998. Not one to rest on her laurels, Michelle also acquired an MFA in Poetry from The New School in 2008.

A person with long hair and a green shirt

Description automatically generatedShe worked diligently for over twenty years as a public interest lawyer. Her life took an unforeseen detour when she was diagnosed with the neurological form of Lyme Disease, putting her on a multi-year path to recovery. This challenging period became a crucible for her creative transformation. Unable to continue her law career, she delved into fiction, writing her debut novel "Ring." The book, slated for publication next year, incorporates her personal experience with chronic illness, although it ventures into realms of imagination she never explored in her legal briefs or her poetry.

Michelle has received numerous accolades for her work across different mediums. Notable among these are her quarterfinalist position in the ScreenCraft Cinematic Book Competition 2023, being a finalist for multiple fiction prizes including the 2020 Book Pipeline Unpublished Contest, and being longlisted for various awards such as the Dzanc Prize for Fiction. Her poetry manuscripts have also earned her a semi-finalist spot for the Pamet River Prize and Willow Run Poetry Book Award.

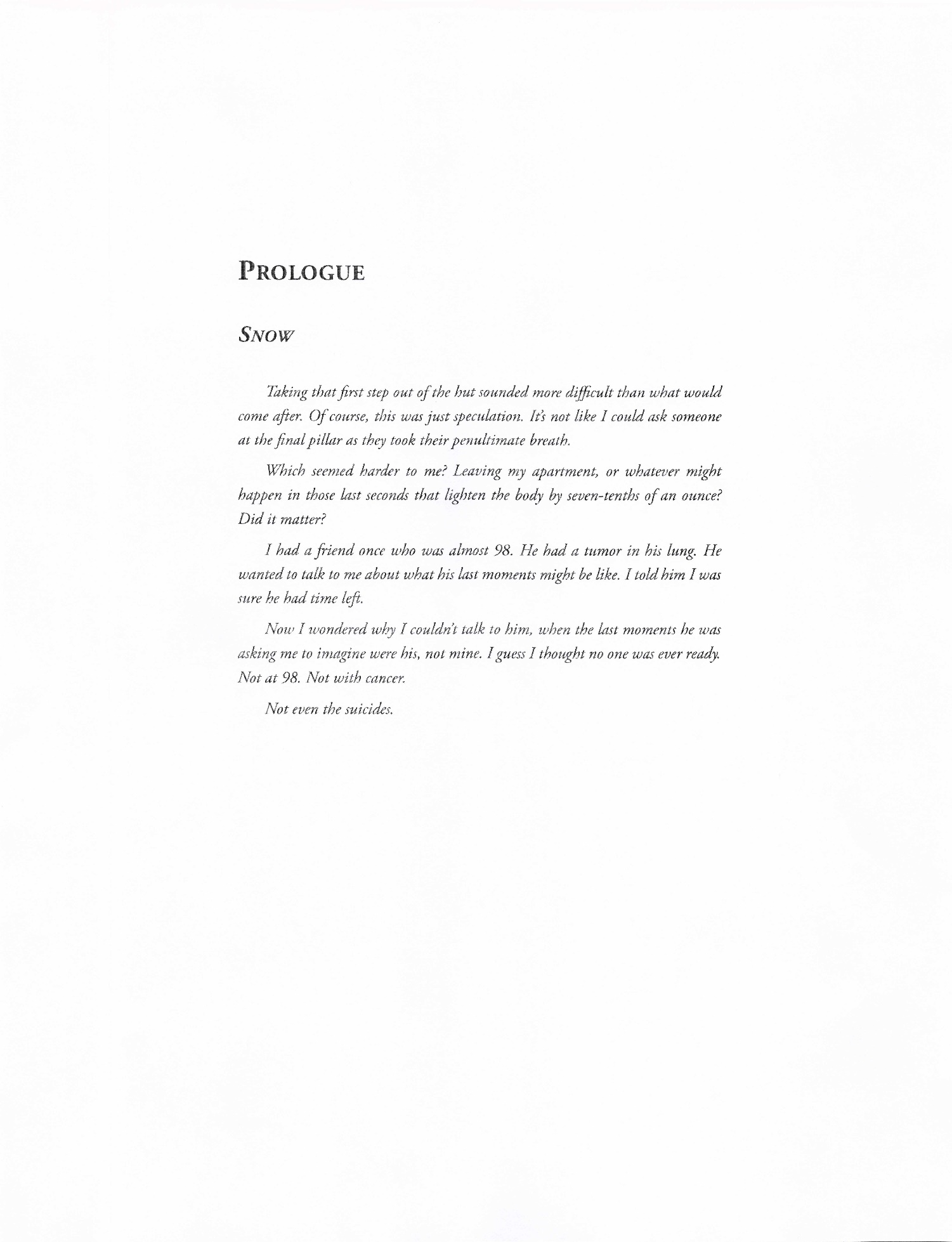
In the world of poetry, Michelle's work has been published in numerous journals like the Virginia Quarterly Review, Connecticut River Review, and LIPS. Her poetry chapbook "Protection" was published by Poetry Box and one of its poems received a Pushcart Prize nomination. She’s also had the honor of being nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best New Poets for other poems.

Michelle’s commitment to community is evident in her service roles. She currently serves as the Executive Director and Board Member of the Laura Boss Poetry Foundation. She also mentors for the organization "We Are Not Numbers," providing guidance to young writers.

As a seasoned public speaker, Michelle has featured in diverse forums including the Delaware Valley Poetry Festival, as well as regional, national, and international conferences.

She resides in New Jersey with her family, where she also runs a cat rescue. Her upcoming projects include a collection of humorous personal essays about the opinionated animals she has lived with. In her downtime, Michelle strums a guitar and composes songs that she sings anywhere no one will hear her.

*To explore more of Michelle's diverse body of work, you can visit her website at michellelerner.net.*



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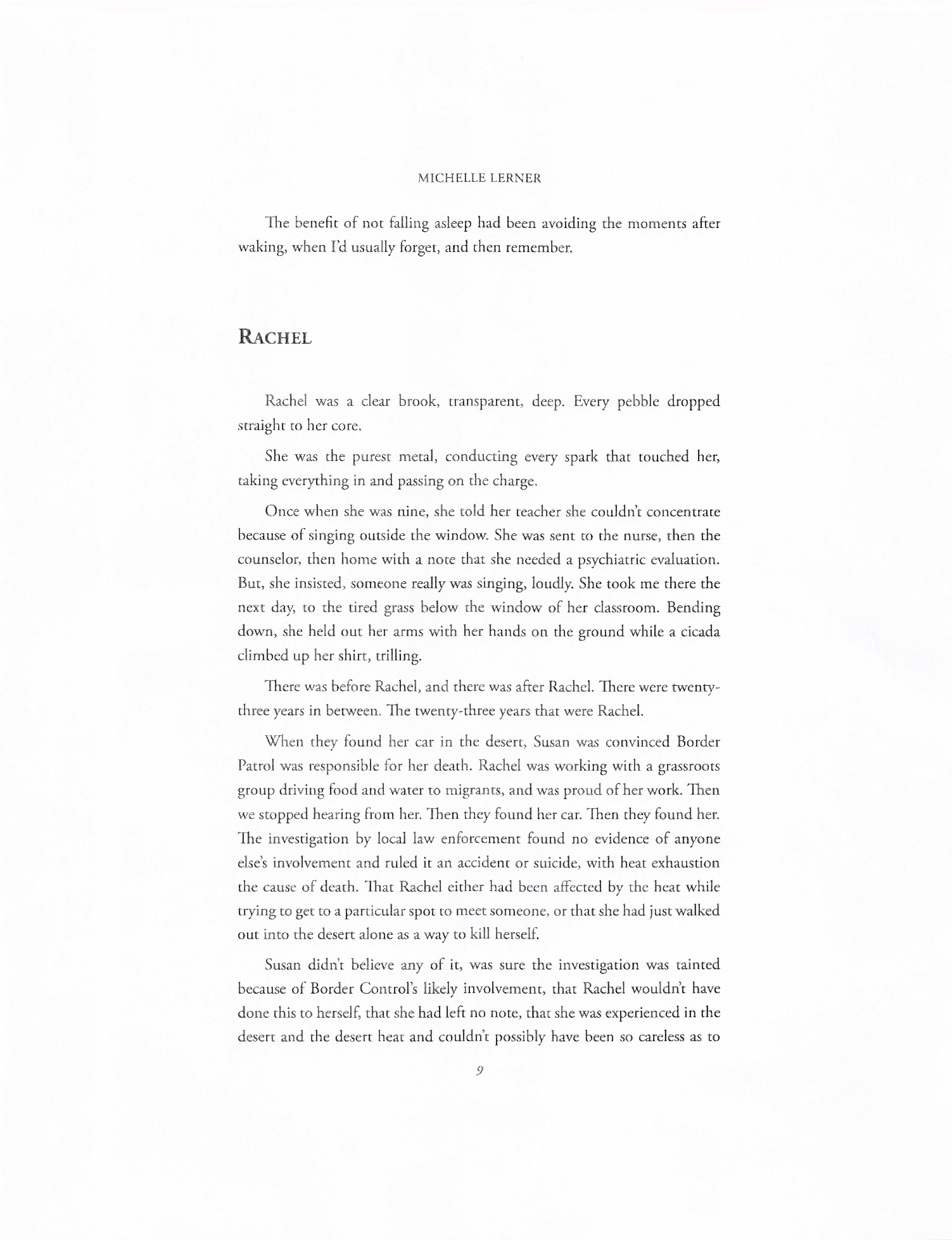
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