

A circular logo with a purple background and a white border. At the top, there is a small icon of a rainbow over an open book. Below the icon, the text "READ WITH JENNA" is written in white, uppercase letters. At the bottom, there is another small icon of an open book.

READ WITH  
JENNA

A detailed botanical illustration of a pond scene. In the foreground, a large white lotus flower with a yellow center is in full bloom. To its right is a cluster of small pink flowers. In the background, there are more lotus flowers, some in bud, and large green leaves. The water is dark, and the sky is a soft, hazy blue and yellow.

# THE WATERS

A NOVEL

# BONNIE JO CAMPBELL

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

# THE WATERS



*A Novel*

BONNIE JO CAMPBELL



**W. W. NORTON & COMPANY**  
*Independent Publishers Since 1923*

*To my darling Christopher*



A woman without a donkey is a donkey herself.

— AN ADAGE FROM RURAL ETHIOPIA



We are like bowls. There have always been bowls. They're shaped the way they are for a reason. Yes some have curlicues or paintings of angels but a bowl is a bowl and it has always been a bowl and it was here before you came and it will outlast you.

— DIANE SEUSS, FROM THE POEM "BOWL"



# The View from Whiteheart, Michigan



## CHAPTER ZERO— PROLOGUE



*The town has a troubled soul.*

ONCE UPON A TIME, M'sauga Island was the place where desperate mothers abandoned baby girls and where young women went seeking to prevent babies altogether. But in living memory, Rose Cottage on the island was the home of the herbalist Hermine “Herself” Zook, who raised her three daughters there. The oldest, a lawyer named Primrose, was the most accomplished; the middle daughter, Maryrose, called Molly, a nurse, was the most practical; and the youngest, Rose Thorn, was lazy and beautiful. Hermine’s medicines—her tinctures, salves, and waters—are now discredited in the light of day, but at night the people of Whiteheart, Michigan, still use them if some tidy housekeeper or other busybody hasn’t tossed away the unlabeled jars and bottles. Only tiny amounts of these fixes are required, as they have become more effective with time—sometimes just unstopping a bottle is enough to release a cloud of soothing into an ailing household. The island and its women loom large in the dreams of local folks, who sometimes wake up sweating from visions of witches in black (though the island women never wore black) or of crows watchful in treetops, or of swamp streams bubbling up through the floorboards of their houses. It is said the island, where healing waters percolate to the surface, was a place where women shared one another’s dreams, a place where women did what they wanted.

Anybody around here can give you directions. Head northeast off the old highway onto County Road 681 and turn left at Dinzik’s barn—people will say it’s red, but there’s hardly a flake of rust-colored paint left on the wood —and down a potholed lane known as Schoolhouse Road, though the school burned

down before anybody still living was born. Schoolhouse ends at Lovers Road. To the right is the gun club, so go left instead. Some years ago, Ada McIntyre's grandson, while drunk, kept going straight off the end of Schoolhouse Road and into the swampy waters, where he hit a tree at full speed. He's dead now, having bled to death from the hemophilia that runs in the family. Take that left, and you'll see on your left a tavern housed in a military-issue Quonset hut with the name Muck Rattler stenciled in block letters over the door.

Past the tavern, for the next mile and a half on that side of Lovers Road, there are farm fields, and on the other side (the north, the swamp side), a line of giant willows. Keep going until you come to a hay barn and a pasture on the south side of the road where two old donkeys graze, a gray jack named Triumph and a spotted jenny named Disaster, nicknamed Aster, like the flower. There is a high-ceilinged two-story house set way back from the road, with a sign at the driveway that says "Boneset." Naming a house and property was an extravagant gesture in these parts, and Wild Will was extravagant, but in fact he borrowed the name from his wife. The weathered cedar of the house and the barn—neither has ever been painted—glows silver at sunrise and sunset if you see it from certain angles.

Across Lovers Road, in a grassy area shaded by giant willow trees, sits the Boneset Table with a locked cash box bolted to the top. Through a break in the willows, if the fog isn't too heavy, you can see the edge of what everyone around here calls the Waters, where a sort of island rises up, accessible by a bridge three planks wide, strung between oil barrels floating on the watery muck. There, under the branches of sycamores, oaks, and hackberries, the green-stained Rose Cottage sinks on the two nearest corners so that it appears to be squatting above the bridge, preparing to pitch itself into the muck. Beyond the cottage, the trees give way to a mosquito-infested no-man's-land of tussocks, marshes, shallows, hummocks, pools, streams, and springs a half



mile wide between solid ground and the Old Woman River. This is where Herself harvested wild rice, cattails, staghorn sumac, and a thousand other plants. Rose Cottage is boarded up now, but if you check at the county office, you can confirm that the taxes are paid up on the hundreds of acres of the Waters still owned by Hermine Zook.

The Waters occupies the northeastern quarter of the town, six thousand acres, and all of it apart from Hermine's section is under state protection for half a dozen rare wildflowers and the Blanding's turtle, as well as the endangered massasauga "m'sauga" rattlesnake. The state wetlands don't bring in any revenue, apart from a few birdwatchers stopping at the gas station. Even families in Whiteheart who have never farmed this area know how the Waters can creep into low-lying cropland and undermine what looks solid.

Half a century ago, Wild Will Zook ventured into the Waters and fell in love with Herself after she treated his rattlesnake bite and cooked and fed him the snake that had bitten him. Maybe he married her because of some spell she put on him, or maybe just because it was the most outrageous thing a man could do in this town. And it did impress everybody, made him seem even taller than he was. After they were married, he bought the Boneset land for them at a tax sale and built the big cedar house, from which vantage point he looked down upon the island, but he was never able to convince his wife to live there with him. That this high-ceilinged two-story dwelling sat empty with its windows boarded up for decades was a testament to the power and determination of Hermine Zook. People loved to decry her stubbornness, both for refusing to live there and for keeping it empty all those years, and especially for her refusal to sell any portion of her holdings, the Waters or the dry land at Boneset.

During the time she and Wild Will were together, Hermine made medicines that were pleasant, reliable, and sweet, flavored with blackberries and honey. Back then, Hermine used to let folks come to the island to bathe in the shallow mineral pools, to have their blood pressure corrected by leeches, to have their

wounds debrided by maggots, even to have bones set if the fractures were simple. But after fifteen years, when she sent Wild Will away, her medicine changed. While she continued healing, she never again allowed anyone onto the island and only dispensed medicines sparingly, meeting her patients by the road, at the Boneset Table. Her cures changed; now they tasted raw, and they burned the skin upon application and the throat going down. Similarly, the aged whiskey she had once produced for Wild Will from old stores under Rose Cottage disappeared, and she offered only the bootleg juice that took the enamel off men's teeth, and then there was no liquor for sale at all. Signs appeared at the edges of her vast swamp property, images of menacing skulls painted on trees and rocks, with no words, some with piles of bones around them.

The newly embittered potions inspired fear, and so the cures were thought to be stronger and more effective and gained Herself a new kind of respect. As more folks left their farms and began working in the paper mill, they became mistrustful of a cure that didn't include a punishment, that didn't intensify momentarily the suffering it promised to alleviate. And in more recent times, they came to her confused and angry, with slow-growing cancers of the liver and reproductive organs, disorders she could not cure. Sometimes people stood at Boneset and shouted their demands for healing across the swamp channel as though she was a dispensing pharmacy.

EVEN CONSIDERING THE PLANET'S rising temperatures, winter in Whiteheart remains long and cold, and when spring finally comes, when the ground thaws, people here begin to feel energy trickle up through the topsoil and into them through the soles of their shoes. Now, more than ever, they are hungry for beauty, and they dream about Hermine's youngest daughter, the lazy, lighthearted, golden-haired Rose Thorn, flowing back to them like a bright stream in a riverbed that has been dry, though she also might appear in the form of a sly starved animal trotting across a field. Or they dream of her enrobed in

sheaves of golden wheat or rising up from the heart of the tender, pale celery stalks—even whole fields of celery rising up through the mud, though none of the few remaining farmers grow wheat or celery anymore, just corn and soybeans, as recommended by the Farm Bureau.

As a child, Rosie was so thin-skinned that she suffered from chilblains and frostbite on the short walk to the bus stop—that is, whenever she was bullied into going to school by her sister Molly. More often, she skipped school and spent her winter days in bed on the island reading Oz books and fairy tales. From the time she was a teenager, she ran away from home for part of every winter to visit Primrose, who was practicing law in Southern California. There is more than one old photo of Rosie tucked in a Ziploc bag and hidden someplace where a man's wife or girlfriend won't think to look. None of the blurry photos do her justice, but any libation is welcome in thirsty times.

Complaining about Rose Thorn's foolishness still makes the local men and women feel cheerful, and complain they do. Recalling Rose Thorn smiling and blinking in sunlight with a beer in one hand and a Pall Mall coffin nail in the other, not bothering to swat away mosquitoes or ground bees, inspires folks to plant their gardens, to kiss their misbehaving children, and even to make love. The truth is, Rose Thorn is right here in unincorporated Whiteheart now, in the flesh, though she no longer lives on the island. She stays out of the public eye these days, and in cold weather she exists in something like the languid state of the overwintering massasauga rattlesnakes, a brumation, in which a creature still drinks to sustain itself and bites if threatened. If Rose Thorn needs something from a neighbor, it will be her daughter who comes asking for it.

In spring, the local men, before stopping in at the gun club at the other end of Lovers Road, drive past the island, sometimes idling and looking down the bank to check if the new gate leading to the island bridge is still locked. (Titus Clay, the closest neighbor, installed the gate for added security, though the more effective security is the fact that the planks in one ten-foot span of the

bridge over the quickmuck have been removed.) A combination of superstition and guilt and respect and fear keeps people from trying to get across, even if it doesn't prevent men from occasionally shooting at rattlesnakes from the edge of Lovers Road.

Sometimes at two a.m., when a group of working men get kicked out of the Muck Rattler by the bachelor barkeep, Smiley Smith, they are drawn to the island, especially if there's a full moon or a remarkable crescent hanging over the mound of land like a hunting horn, or if an auspicious warm wind is blowing from the southeast. Starved for an old mystery, they head down the road to the spot where Hermine used to sit with the afflicted. They rest their cans of beer on the Boneset Table—its six legs now made of iron pipes driven deep into the earth—beneath which the little Babby Basket still hangs, lined with a fresh blanket. Where Herself once provided a rich selection of herbs and cures and medicinal eggs, something to heal wounds and ills even in bitterest winter, now there are only a few odd vegetables or berries or bark, left there by who knows whom.

Herself used to fix the rotten feet and sluggish guts of Whiteheart, and for every baby born here (or *babby*, as she said), she left on this table a swallow of healing donkey milk, which was said to make smarter, better-behaved children. In addition, it is said the donkey milk entered the blood to work as a prophylactic antivenom, reducing the reaction to rattlesnake bites. The milk was a way for Herself to touch every babby at least once. Though Titus Clay swears the old woman is still alive, she has not lifted a finger to help anybody for years, has not even attended a funeral to burn cedar and herbs for cleansing and for remembering the way she always used to do. Everybody knows Titus, now owner and operator of Whiteheart Farms, the acres that spread out at the end of Lovers Road, once the largest celery farm in the world, has an interest in the family that goes way beyond procuring a medicine for his disease, what Hermine Zook has always called thinblood.

Rose Cottage used to glow with the light of its inhabitants but now is dark at night and often shrouded in fog, which cloaks it from view. You can hear a frog ga-gunging or a great horned owl hooting or occasionally a goatsucker whippoorwilling. Such old, quiet sounds after hours make the men feel not only their aches and pains and patches of raw skin but also a restless worry that without Herself, the future could mean a worsening of their symptoms, along with the deterioration of the natural world that nourishes them. The cool, rich scent of swamp flowers and rot can bring to men's minds a queer longing to be touched and listened to, and since reaching out to one another is out of the question, a man will take a swig of something from his pocket. Somebody might tell a story of Wild Will, who they say stood seven feet tall and had arms like John Henry who beat the steam drill, arms scarred by barbed wire and animal bites and a tattoo on each arm, on the left the name Hermine with snakes wrapping around the letters. Wild Will was known to tell ghost stories that would shoot chills through your vertebrae and spawn a fear in you that any mysterious figure you saw in the swamp might be a water demon or a soul stealer. Though people don't recall those tales precisely, they still feel fear at any light or sound out there in the Waters whose source they can't trace.

Nobody outside the family knows the crime that made Hermine banish her husband after fifteen years of marriage. Within the family, there is some acknowledgment that what happened was not technically a crime at all—since his stepdaughter Prim was seventeen, above the age of consent, and she said it wasn't rape. Herself sending Wild Will away saved his reputation and added to his mystique by allowing him to simply disappear while still a vital and handsome man. Even if he had gone so far as to confess, many men might have made excuses for him, might have hearkened back to the Bible and refused to condemn Lot for what they saw as the crimes of his daughters.

Standing near the Boneset Table in the dark on any given Saturday night, a few men not home with their wives remember when there was life and laughter

here, and sometimes they just need to express their confusion or sorrow or rage. One man pulls the revolver from his belt holster and shoots from the hip at the old green cottage, whose windows have already been shattered and covered with plywood. In response, another man takes out his 1911 target pistol from a shoulder harness and shoots a few rounds through the fog to conduct the night orchestra, establishing authority over the buzzing, whistling, murmuring creatures, who go abruptly silent. A man slides his father's twelve-gauge shotgun from the rack in the cab of his truck, aims, and fires at a remaining section of the bridge, which is already sinking on its oil barrels. However, after a few volleys, the men, who have to go to work or church in the morning, feel sick to their stomachs and decide to stop wasting ammunition on the carcass of a creature that, for all intents and purposes, appears to already be dead.



## CHAPTER ONE



*Rose Thorn always comes home.*

ONCE UPON A TIME, in the black muck floodplains of unincorporated Whiteheart, where the taxes are low, farm families used to grow the world's sweetest, tenderest celery, Whiteheart Celery. Which is to say, the town was not named for the European settlers who sought to destroy the rich Potawatomi culture that preceded them; the place was instead named for the crop that the settlers planted, the crop that supported, for half a century, the people living here.

Massasauga Island itself has a history stretching back through centuries, but the part set down on these pages only begins on May 8, fourteen years ago, when the sun shone brilliantly, though not upon the people here, since it could not penetrate the dense cloud cover. At this time, Herself still lived on the island and cured what ailed some people, though her medicines had tasted especially bitter lately, since she was bereft of her three daughters. In September, her youngest, Rosie, had run off to stay with her sister, Primrose, in California, that state being as far as Prim could get from Herself. Molly, the middle daughter, worked at the nearby hospital, but she was presently staying in Lansing, finishing an intensive nurse practitioner training program.

The story of the daughters, then, begins with their absence.

On that day, a handful of men, including three sons of farmers and a hired man, drank their after-church beers and pops at the Muck Rattler Lounge, trying to ease the ache and longing they always felt after the service now. After the previous reverend's sermons, folks had left church feeling shivery, lightheaded, and overwhelmed as by a ghost story, and now they left with lists of instructions, prohibitions, and judgments. Today the Reverend Roy, nephew

of the old reverend, said they should resist the temptation to ask for anything from Hermine Zook. Christ suffered, he said, and so would they.

“Knowledge of God,” he said, “is borne from the furnace of affliction.”

As Roy had spoken these words, a lightning bolt of pain spasmed through his lower back—recent surgery had failed to provide relief—and the real pain in his voice lent gravity to his message. His own suffering was made worse while Molly was away. He didn’t acknowledge her absence as the cause of the pain but saw the twin difficulties visited upon him as another test administered by the Almighty.

The men at the Muck Rattler chose to drink outside at the picnic table by the road, because it had stormed the previous night, and it would be dark inside the windowless bar until the power came back on. The five of them stood under that sky the milky color of a blind horse’s eye, shouting at one another to be heard over the gas-powered generator that kept the Rattler’s refrigerators running. If they had been inside, they would have missed what was coming down Lovers Road.

To the east and the west of the bar, ancient black willows, some of them eighty feet high—larger than the species ordinarily grows—stretched as far as the men could see. The ground was soft after last night’s storms, and the foliage was a lush green expanse, unspoiled by the zizzing mosquitoes that would hatch in the swamp and roadside ditches once the weather warmed. This week, though their grandfathers would have said it was too early to plant, the sons of farmers were helping their fathers tune up machinery. The farmers were planting earlier and earlier as the years passed, but they didn’t like to say so. Unloosening their grandfathers’ and great-grandfathers’ patterns unnerved them, and some had begun to indulge what felt like a curious kind of gambling spirit. A given farmer might wake at three a.m. from a nightmare of his soul slipping from his body in bed and floating away through a window cracked

open, and he might then go out into his dark barn and fire up his planter or grain drill and chug along the empty road to his nearest field.

The farmers in question didn't know what drove them, but the early planting was in part a natural response to the slight warming of the planet they felt in their bones; and after one man planted his first field, the rest of the farmers sensed the rising of a new leader, and they followed suit and planted a field early as well. The men did this even though their fathers and grandfathers had taught them grain would not sprout in cold ground, even though the rash acts would trigger sleepless nights filled with worry about seeds freezing.

Most of the women waited to plant vegetable gardens, as they always had, until they saw Hermine planting hers in front of Wild Will's Boneset House — the island itself was too shady for vegetables—but a few expressed a solidarity with the men by planting prematurely. These women, however, sprouted extra seeds for a second crop, just in case, in the egg-carton planters they kept in the little glass houses they'd built out of old single-pane wood-frame windows. All year they saved egg cartons, the way they always had, leaving their extras on the Boneset Table for Herself to fill with eggs from the herb-fed island chickens.

Titus Clay was not one of the sons of farmers at the Muck Rattler that afternoon, not yet. After the church service, he'd said he was going home with his father to check on their generators and he'd be along soon, but the men at the Muck Rattler didn't quite trust his father, Titus Clay Sr., not to start planting before the rest of them. Despite the thinblood he suffered and had passed on to Titus Jr., the great upright farmer lived in a world of certainty and was known to make a firm and binding decision at the drop of a sweat-stained feed cap. As the sunshine tried to muscle its way through the haze, they watched for Titus's truck coming from the west. Everything made more sense when Titus was with them. Though he was only twenty-four, he always had the right joke, the right Bible reference, the right comment about a man digging a hole ("Larry, looks

like you're digging a pit for your worst enemy—I can see you're bound to fall in it") or about an alluring woman appearing in town ("Tie down your tarps, boys, it's a tornado in a skirt"). While they waited for him, they milled about uneasily, as though even the way they might stand or sit wasn't quite right, and readjusted their collars and belts. Mostly the men wore jeans and clean sports shirts for church, while Rick Dickmon wore a button-down, but Jamie Standish wore his usual camo pants and green T-shirt, and he was known to carry a small pistol in his pocket, even into the house of the Lord.

These men were trying to live decent, comfortable lives. They all—including Smiley, the barkeep, who would be out soon—imagined their families and friends genuinely liking and respecting them, and they pictured themselves feeling at ease when talking to anybody in town. Their bent toward humility was tempered only by their desire to be recognized as men like their fathers and grandfathers, but they didn't see themselves as particularly important in the scheme of things. Standish thought he might have been important if he'd been able to join the Marines, but at the young age of twenty-three he had an old man's feet—they were flat and bedeviled with bunions and ingrown toenails that had the tendency to get infected.

"You think it's still okay to take aspirin?" Tony Martin asked. "Reverend Roy said we should suck it up."

Nobody had an answer or even a smart-ass comment. They all hoped that wasn't what the reverend was saying. Standish shook his head in annoyance at Tony's giving voice to the conundrum. Tony, known as Two-Inch Tony, wasn't from Whiteheart, but his grandparents were from Potawatomi, on the other side of the river, and he'd married red-headed Cynthia Darling six years ago and was still trying to fit in. Cynthia had gotten drunk with Standish's wife, Prissy, in Standish's kitchen last month, and Standish, in the next room watching TV, heard them laughing about their husbands' lack of sexual prowess. The next morning he parked his truck on Lovers Road and walked over to where

Hermine Zook, Herself, was sitting in a big wooden chair next to the Boneset Table, the way she often was at that time of day, her braids wrapped around her head like a crown and that damned creepy cowry shell necklace on her bosom. Now he felt like a fool. Just the memory of sitting down in the folding chair beside that witch and holding her hand where somebody might have seen him reddened him with humiliation and made his feet ache. When Herself had looked at him, her eyes had filled with tears.

Who the hell was she to cry over him?

“If we’re supposed to suffer,” Whitey Whitby said, “then why’s Reverend Roy getting back surgery?” Whitby was Titus’s cousin on his mother’s side, and he’d worked on Whiteheart Farms since he was ten. He was almost as tall as Titus, and though he was only nineteen, he’d managed to grow a scraggly beard. Because he didn’t have the thinblood that came down the male line, Titus Clay Sr. made him do the dangerous farm jobs, such as castrating bulls and climbing into grain bins to clear clogs.

Standish looked up now and saw a crow mocking him from a branch above. He walked over to his truck on his aching feet and slid his rifle from the rack in the cab. When he slammed his truck door, the crow loped away over the Waters, showing off how free it was.

Then the wind changed direction and sent smoke from the rattling generator across the table, and Whitby erupted into a coughing fit so severe he had to put down his coffin nail next to his Mountain Dew on the edge of the picnic table. He’d been suffering from a lingering cold and sinus situation he could not shake.

“I think I’ll risk damnation and ask Herself for something for this cough,” Whitby said when he could speak again. He was known to be a smart-ass, a real joker, but he’d become a chain-smoker and a ruminator in these last months, and his life didn’t feel fun anymore.

“My pop used to get some powerful medicine for catarrh from Herself,” Dickmon said, pushing his heavy black glasses against his face. “Used to swear by it. But first she’s going to tell you cut out the cancer sticks.”

“Rev Roy’s right. You don’t need none of that witch medicine,” Standish said, though his own father and grandfather had both sworn by that sweet-bitter coughing cure made with boneset, slippery elm, and honey. Standish had asked the old woman for something else, something to make his wife love him, a *philter*, he’d heard it called, and he flushed again with embarrassment at the thought of his request. In the face of the old woman’s tears, he’d pulled his hand away, gotten into his truck, and left.

“What’s catarrh?” asked Two-Inch Tony. He didn’t look like the other men, had thick dark hair and an aquiline nose, for starters, and was shorter than the rest, strong and wiry like an acrobat, except that one of his legs hadn’t grown as long as the other. But his nickname wasn’t about his height or proportions. It came from people claiming his concrete flat work was thin after a woodchuck cracked the poured floor of Ralph Darling’s uncle’s garage. Before that, on a patio he’d poured near the Dollar-Mizer, a tree root busted through. A man can’t help it, he said—his voice defensive—if the groundhogs around here are built like sumo wrestlers, if the tree roots have the strength of swamp snakes. Tony needed some paying work, but people were uneasy about the future right now, were feeling they couldn’t afford to pour patios or foundations for outbuildings.

The farmers had a certain hunch in their shoulders after last year’s poor yields, though you’d be hard put to get a farmer ever to admit to a good year. Some people blamed a curse by Hermine Zook, who had been in a bad mood since Rose Thorn had gone off. Rosie was a bright spot in all their lives. Even a decade ago, people would come to sit beside Herself at the roadside hoping for a chance to see the pretty, dreamy girl reading a book in the grass or walking slowly and lazily across the bridge from the island. If she talked back then, she