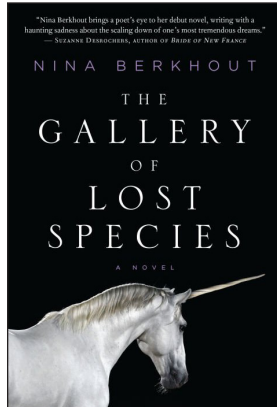


## Book Review: The Gallery of Lost Species

*Gilbert E. Mowmessie*



Berkhout, N. (2015). *The Gallery of Lost Species*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books

***4.5 stars for a touching insight into sisterhood!***

*The special bond that often exists between two sisters is epitomized in this book as an attraction that their parents find incomprehensible.*

*Edith's endless desire to help her older sister Vivienne seems perfectly natural and will bring back memories for those who grew up as sisters*

## Objectives of the Novel

The English idiom ‘Never judge a book by its cover’ rings true here. This debut novel by Nina Berkhout, an award-winning Canadian poet, does not try to prove the existence of unicorns or offer a list of notable extinct animal species. Berkhout examines family responsibilities and multilayered relationships with love and abandonment, citing human expectations that often go unmet. The Gallery of Lost Species tells a poignant storyline that is incredible and compelling like her poems. If you desire immersion in a deeply moving narrative to soothe and inspire your soul, this may be the perfect read.

We accompany the book’s narrator, Edith Walker, on her emotional journey as she struggles free from her old sister’s shadow, while simultaneously dragging her back from the brink of a breakdown during dark days of despair. This book cannot be called a page-turner but it perfectly describes coming-of-age emotions.

## Main Ideas of the Story

Edith is a talentless, podgy, dark-haired, plain-looking girl who grows up overshadowed by her big sister, Vivienne, a blonde child who competes in beauty pageants, is a talented artist and scores straight A grades without trying. Henry, their kind but weak father, is a failed artist who works as a janitor. Their cold-hearted mother, Constance, was a French model

in her youth, and now devotes herself and the family fortune to push Vivienne into the life that she had missed. Both girls grow up with no love from their mother, Edith chooses to follow in her father's footsteps. She collects oddities, studies old coins and reads a lot, while Vivienne spends almost all her life rebelling against her mother's modeling expectations.

The story contains just the right amount of unrequited love and rocky friendship to wrench your heart. On a family trip to Lake Louise, 13-year-old Edith and 16-year-old Vivienne meet a college student named Liam. Edith is consumed by a crush on Liam and tries to win his heart; however, Liam, like many teenage boys they know, falls instead for Vivienne.

Throughout her development from youth to adulthood, Edith is torn between pursuing her own desires and trying to rescue her sister who becomes a drug addict and engages in many self-destructive behaviors. After taking a job at the National Gallery of Canada, Edith meets and befriends an old man called Theo; a cryptozoologist who tries to prove the existence of legendary animals. She develops a fondness for him and realizes that her desperate search to help Vivienne has embodied an emotional connection with an old man chasing creatures from a long lost world.

## Story Values

### Psychology of Collecting

The psychology of collecting is explained as a means of finding solace in accumulating objects or arranging and rearranging a collection. For example, Henry, Edith's father, avoids facing the reality of his deteriorating marriage by seeking solace in artifacts that he and his children scavenged from the streets. Edith follows in her father's footsteps and finally finds comfort in hiding in the gallery where she works and organizing artifacts to block out the memory of her dysfunctional family.

### The Unicorn as a Metaphorical Symbol

A novel, like a work of art, has no correct interpretation. This book offers a surreal mix of fact and fantasy for interpretation by the reader.

Berkhout depicts the unicorn on the front cover as a metaphorical symbol to represent the hope and peace that Edith continuously seeks. Her pursuit of the mythical horned creature is an allegorical representation of her quest to find and save her sister. The unicorn is mentioned several times in the storyline.

In ancient folklore, the unicorn symbolizes positivity and hope, while its horn is believed to have the power to heal sickness and purify poisoned water. Edith secretly fantasizes that the unicorn can cure Vivienne. She asks her new friend, Jonathan, if they should visit the healing river in Florida where legend says a unicorn once dipped its horn.

At the end of the book, Edith takes a solo trip to old haunts to spread Henry's ashes. She visualizes everyone in her family, including Liam, spending time together just like in the old days. The narration ends with, "Then, out of the corner of my eye, this brilliance". Berkhout leaves it to the imagination whether Edith does spot another unicorn or just a bright light shone from a nearby object.

This slow-moving family drama has many plot twists. Thoughts linger on after reading the last page. Real life hurts; if you want to feel good, go eat an ice cream. The book is recommended for those who are fond of sad stories, feel lonely, or simply grew up with a sibling and want to remember those times.

The Gallery of Lost Species is about finding solace in unexpected places, in works of art, in people, and in animals that no longer walk this earth.

## References

- Berkhout, N. (2016). *The Gallery of Lost Species*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books
- Brandes, N. (2020). *Mythological Creatures: Unicorn & Pegasus*. Gainesville: Enclave Publishing.