



A Haunted Girl

Ethan Sacks

Naomi Sacks

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Supernatural horrors meet frank discussions of mental health in Ethan and Naomi Sacks's bighearted graphic novel *A Haunted Girl*.

After a suicide attempt and a stay in a psychiatric ward, Cleo struggles to reintegrate. She avoids her best friend and has conversations with her father through her bedroom door. Pressure from her competitive school and memories of a career-ending karate injury add to her heavy mental load. Cleo's circumstances nosedive further when she begins to experience visions of spirits. She'll face death again in the form of an ancient goddess who's intent on destruction. Power flows through Cleo's bloodline, and only she can stop the impending apocalypse.

As Cleo breaks the veil between the living and the dead, other boundaries blur too: between dreaming and wakefulness, reality and hallucination. When others begin to witness the horrors—like a sinister, blood-red rain—Cleo realizes that she does not have to face fear alone. Her loved ones acknowledge her hauntings and her pain.

In a subversion of disability tropes, Cleo's story isn't metaphorical. Her supernatural abilities emerge apart from her suicide attempt, and the realities of her depression are expressed in uncomplicated terms. And notes from mental health advocacy groups are included throughout.

The expressive illustrations blend cultural influences with skill. The villain's design evokes ukiyo-e art of Japan, while the colors and textures hearken to the punchy traditions of American superhero comics. Cool blue tones diffuse the pages, haunting the story through lightning, fluorescence, and ghost plasma.

During her recovery, Cleo's therapist plies her with gentle insights: "Your old normal doesn't exist anymore. You need to find a new one. And that takes time and grace." Over the course of four action-packed comic book issues, *A Haunted Girl* gives Cleo both.

LUKE SUTHERLAND (May / June 2024)

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