

At the Edge of the Haight

Katherine Seligman

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Unsparing but sympathetic, and with journalistic details, *At the Edge of the Haight* begins on an ominous note: a young runaway, Maddy, and her rambunctious dog, Root, happen upon a dying man in Golden Gate Park. A stranger threatens to harm Maddy if she identifies him. But while the dead man and the stranger suggest a mystery story, Katherine Seligman's novel has broader intentions. It focuses on Maddy's trials as part of San Francisco's large homeless population, and is an intense, personal drama about wayward lives positioned between redemption and disaster.

Told from Maddy's point of view, *At the Edge of the Haight* travels to places of the City by the Bay that few have seen: abandoned flats, chaotic shelters, and secluded encampments in parks and hills. Forever on the move, Maddy and her homeless friends scrounge for food and shelter while staying one step ahead of belligerent drug dealers and intimidating police officers. These downtrodden characters act like many families do: they bicker, drift together and apart, and find room for love and compassion.

While the central mystery about the dead man generates some tension, the novel's true suspense lies in whether Maddy has the inner resources, or even the desire, to escape the life that she's fallen into. She first refuses the help of the dead man's family, who offer her friendship, but is later forced to choose between her uncertain present and the unknown future. Her realizations about what it truly means to be free are undeniable in their emotional pull. Putting a human face on those who live at society's margins, *At the Edge of the Haight* is an intimate novel whose young characters struggle for survival and a little bit of dignity.

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