

Benefit

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The incisive, intriguing novel *Benefit* contemplates standards of accomplishment and value, as well as the ambiguity of capitalistic philanthropy.

A decade before the events of the novel, Laura received a coveted Weatherfield Fellowship, which allowed her to study at Oxford. Coming from a smaller college, Laura was surprised to be included among these “striving, often Ivy League students.”

Laura again becomes involved with the Weatherfield Foundation in 2011, when she is hired to write the institution’s centennial history. She reconnects with her Weatherfield fellows and realizes that while they have achieved varying degrees of success, she has not: instead, she lost her adjunct professor’s position and, numb, moved back into her mother’s house.

The Weatherfield sugar fortunes, made by cultivating America’s sweet tooth, are called into question when Laura’s research reveals how sugar production exploits land and labor and creates toxic working environments. Laura also discovers that the Weatherfield family has its share of secrets and dysfunction.

Laura is compelling as she moves along the sidelines of her friends’ brighter lives. Intelligent and perceptive, she belittles herself as being “not beautiful,” with a “drive towards the uselessly difficult.” She worries about her dwindling bank balance; even with a PhD and a completed literary dissertation, she cannot find suitable employment.

Benefit is a fascinating novel—both a portrait of an industrial empire and revelatory about the elitist greed that often shadows philanthropy. It is also an unnerving glimpse into the impoverishment of academia, as scholars compete for part-time work and paltry salaries.

While the novel leaves Laura in an uncertain state, exiting through a service door after a Weatherfield reception, it also redefines what it means to be a success. As Laura approaches the “fathomless” night, *Benefit* creates hope that she can attain a sense of greater worth by maintaining her integrity.

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