

Christmas in Austin

Benjamin Markovits

Faber & Faber (Nov 7, 2019)

Hardcover \$25.95 (320pp)

978-0-571-35425-2

In Benjamin Markovits's novel *Christmas in Austin*, the Essinger family gathers for the holidays, its siblings traveling from England and the East Coast back to Texas, where festive lights twinkle amid agave plants and the air smells more of barbecue than roasted chestnuts.

The novel is peopled with numerous characters who are as comfortable and quirky as the family home. They include the Essinger parents, their adult children, grandchildren, spouses, significant others, and the occasional neighbor or interloper. Perspectives shift and a keen, omniscient tone alternates between moods of reflection, uncertainty, intimacy, and humor.

Austin itself is a distinct presence in the novel; the city's influx of transplants results in cultural and economic change. The elder Essingers, Bill and Liesel, arrived in 1979 for academic jobs; in recent years, they and their family find themselves feeling more like native Austinites, pondering new housing and business developments and the many hipsters who now call Texas home.

Austin's changing landscape even causes conflict within the family. While shopping for groceries, Paul Essinger questions his brother Nathan's purchases of "rendered duck fat" and "barista" coffee, complaining that Nathan is becoming like Austin's newer, upscale residents. Nathan notes that the house Paul is redesigning on Austin's outskirts is modernist concrete and glass, and that Paul is becoming one of those residents himself.

Beyond its curious Essinger brood, the novel captures the compressed intensity of holiday gatherings: elderly parents are jarred from their settled routines, forced into hosting and accommodating; siblings reconnect or clash; non-family members try to find a sense of belonging or just endure a few days of strangeness. Though Austin is the central location, the narrative incorporates present and remembered lives in Germany, London, New York, and New England with equal perspicacity.

Christmas in Austin ends with a feeling of incomplete closeness, with an almost personal attachment to all of the Essingers and a decided yearning to read about them again.

MEG NOLA (November / December 2019)

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