

Clean Sweep

E. B. Lee

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Clean Sweep is a heartrending novel in which a privileged woman learns empathy—and about how families don't have to be based on genetic bonds.

In E. B. Lee's novel *Clean Sweep*, an under served New York City community transforms at the hands of an exuberant man with a secret past.

When Tessie retires after selling her advertising company and returns to her true love, painting, she also begins helping people who are experiencing homelessness by volunteering at a church that provides clothing and food to those living on the streets of New York City. She assumes a false name, Carli, to do this work because she is afraid of being recognized and having her financial status revealed.

After the sudden death of a homeless woman, Carli meets Grant, a man who works for Mobile Outreach and who is convinced someone is poisoning people on the street. Grant reminds Carli of her long-lost brother, Henry, who joined a cult when he was in college and who she has not seen or heard from in decades. As she and Grant continue to work together to provide aid to the homeless, Carli becomes more involved in the lives of those on the streets—and more suspicious of Grant's perplexing past and indecipherable moods.

Mobile Outreach charges Carli with connecting with two homeless women in an effort to convince them to accept help. As her relationships with these two women, with Grant, and with the other people experiencing homelessness in the story grow, their personalities come alive. Carli's observations of Grant's interactions with the community reveal his empathy and deep understanding, as well as his own inner turmoil as he struggles with alcoholism and a mood disorder. His life story is engrossing—as are the life stories of those he cares for.

Attention is paid to each character's quirks, whether they are appealing or discouraging, and the result is a rounded cast. Still, Carli, despite being the focal character, operates without much agency in the story; often, it feels as though she acts most as a witness. Her personality is flat, though her acknowledgement, and subsequent improvement, of her inner biases concerning the homeless is a poignant development.

Precise conversations come to drive the story. As more trust develops between Carli and those she's tasked with looking out for, they become more open and honest with each other. Further, brief, specific descriptions of settings and characters' physical attributes balance with Carli's inner thoughts well, enabling the flourishing of the story's emotional center. The results of Carli's endeavors with those experiencing homelessness and with Grant are tragic and inspiring in turn.

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AIMÉE JODOIN (June 3, 2021)

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