

News of the Air

Jill Stukenberg

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Jill Stukenberg's gripping, atmospheric novel captures the restless moodiness of a family living in Wisconsin's Northwoods.

In a near future that's threatened by ecological collapse, Allie and Bud flee the sirens and checkpoints of Chicago to buy a resort in Wisconsin—"eleven ramshackle structures perched along the north rim of a small lake." Eighteen years later, their tranquil setting can't conceal the tensions seething under their fraying lives.

Allie is distracted by perpetual remodeling projects in the cabins, "debris like a glacial sheaf ready to slide." Bud, feeling their "property like a weight," is conflicted over his recent affair with a local bartender. And the couple's fearless, reckless daughter, Cassie, harbors secrets about her plans—and about the recent death of her friend. The mysterious arrival of two children in a canoe prompts events that further fragment and unsettle the family.

Via sharp details, the novel depicts a dingy, dying town wherein summer tourism is fleeting, "grown adults greet ... the morning with the crack of a beer," and winter brings a "long white shock and breathlessness." It also describes, with quirky humor, the strangeness of visitors seeking a quaint retreat—including a "truly rich" woman who complains of cilantro allergies; the affluent kayakers and venture capitalists with fancy watches; and an executive's three-story cabin, where guests "ascend or descend [the stairway] in their pajamas in search of bagels and herbed cream cheeses like royalty." An impending environmental catastrophe simmers underneath it all, reflected in the odd booms and flashes of heat lightning in September, and the Lake Michigan beach that has become a "muddy black expanse contoured by the debris of a changing tide."

News of the Air is a poignant, captivating, and troubling novel about people searching for connection in a rustic, bucolic setting that is far from utopian.

KRISTEN RABE (September / October 2022)

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