

★ **Saturnalia****Stephanie Feldman**

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Stephanie Feldman's novel *Saturnalia* is a twisted, ethereal dispatch from a climate change point of no return.

Nina was born in a row house in Philadelphia, in a time of submerged coastal cities and tornadoes tearing through towns. She was malcontent with meager living:

I wanted to be bright ... like the moon ... I wanted to be made of anything other than the dust of a dying earth.

Nina's solution was to climb. She attended Penn and pledged the elite Saturn Club with friends. But when a Saturnalia celebration went sideways, she was propelled to retreat.

Now, Nina ekes out a living telling fortunes with a stolen tarot deck. In her growing need, she accepts a commission to infiltrate the Saturn Club and retrieve a box, contents unknown. But her memories are not her greatest obstacle: she is pursued through the night by desperate capitalists; by friends turned enemies; and by a monstrous, golemesque root creature whose voice brings death.

The novel revels in absurdities, especially the insatiability of those with money and power, even as indulgence ensures a faster arrival at their ends. It exposes the dark sides of glamour and the blind spots of dark magic: Nina's former compatriots find a way to create life from nothing, but forego awe in their rush to exploit their creation. And amid these whorling wonders emerges the ache that Nina tried to suppress—the result of violence as banal and life-altering as the greed that threatens to destroy the world around her.

"We say the earth is dying, but it's not; it's changing. We're the ones who are dying," Nina reflects midway through her transformative night. Such humility, coupled with reverence for that which remains innocent in the ever warping world, becomes the novel's true *prima materia*. *Saturnalia* is a piquant, eerie, and alarming tale.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September / October 2022)

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