

★ Skin Elegies

Lance Olsen

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Lance Olsen explores the past and potential future of human interaction in his spellbinding novel *Skin Elegies*.

The twentieth century was filled with grand and intimate tragedies: natural disasters, murders, abuses, accidents. These incidents—and humanity as a whole—were connected throughout by the bond that exists between the people involved. No matter how fraught or tenuous, human beings' ability to establish connections with others proves to be both a gift and a curse—and, perhaps someday, might be a saving grace.

The story begins with a jumble of words and perspectives. Only their dates provide a hint of what is happening and what is to come. The more each thread unwinds, the more compelling the story as a whole becomes. Each character plunges toward their fate. Some are perpetrators of violence, others are victims; each has an unforgettable, unavoidable story to tell.

Nimble prose captures the book's diverse moods and tones, from a famous murderer's twisted inner ramblings to a Japanese math teacher's minimalist, poetic observations about life as the March 11 earthquake and tsunami hit. Each story is distinctive and memorable, but also contributes to the overall narrative. Olsen's evocative language joins the stories, too, resulting in a sense of continuity and demonstrating the universal urge to connect with others, even in violent or unconventional ways.

The book's ending—a wrenching scene of simultaneous triumph and devastation—brings all of the narratives together and casts them in a stunning new light. All of human history is reduced, in brilliant fashion, to a single sentence that resonates back through every page. The combined effect is a haunting work that shows just how much humans still need each other, despite the worst humanity has to offer.

Skin Elegies is a most unusual and compelling novel about the diversity and necessity of human connection.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (November / December 2021)

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