

The Last Ancient

Eliot Baker

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This wickedly fun horror novel thrusts readers into a Nantucket setting with a mixture of local hunters, wealthy do-gooders, and a sordid family past.

Eliot Baker's debut novel, *The Last Ancient*, is a peculiar text that blends horror with detective fiction, all focused on an investigative journalist who begins a journey beyond belief. Blending social observations, the surreal, and strong writing, the reader is immersed in a world in which a god of old is alive and well, dwelling just in the periphery of gentle society but preying upon its members. Pulitzer Prize–nominated writer Simon Stephenson aims to stop it, if he can understand just what's going on—and prevent himself from being implicated in the crimes.

It's clear from the opening pages that this is not a novel for the squeamish: Stephenson is at a peculiar crime scene, investigating the corpse of a mutilated deer. Rendered in graphic detail, the scene provides enough information to understand why Simon thinks that something fierce and beyond belief is responsible for the death.

This horror novel's Nantucket setting is ideal—a mixture of local hunters and wealthy do-gooders move against a backdrop of untouched, haunting wilderness and mansions. The juxtaposition of these two different Americas draws forth the belief that the country is an untamable land, one that Stephenson is desperately trying to understand. A child of privilege, Stephenson grew up on the island, only to have his world come crashing down when his father was revealed to be an illegal arms dealer. Now a writer, he can still mingle in the world of the wealthy, but only as an outsider.

With a host of impressive writing credentials under his belt and a beautiful (if sometimes problematic) fiancée, Stephenson should be happy, but the rest of his life is complicating matters severely. There's the beautiful, vivacious reporter with whom Stephenson starts spending time, as well as his fiancée's parents, who aren't too fond of him. Add to this a trove of mysterious rare coins turning up around the island—unsettling, considering Stephenson's father had a penchant for collecting them. When a murder then occurs at Stephenson's house, it appears he is involved in the crimes. The notion of his involvement seems entirely ridiculous, but the furtive monster, once revealed, is a beautiful and alluring creature reminiscent of a Lovecraftian nightmare.

If it sounds a bit convoluted, that's because it is. The novel borders on confusing, though in the best possible way: it provides an entertaining enigma poised to unravel. Fans of mystery and horror will embrace the style, which is familiar but well paced and properly executed. It's a page-turner that will not tax the reader. However, some might find the author's reliance on metaphor and, occasionally, stock dialogue to be too conventional. But once the plot gets under way, the peculiar society of Nantucket and the protagonist's sordid family past make this quirky novel a pleasure to read.

As the mysterious occurrences on Nantucket become national news, the novel's enticing first-person narrative turns to the Gothic and bizarre. This is a wickedly fun novel that delights in bringing about revulsion and confusion in the reader, in plain, easily understood prose that conveys a truly unique tale.

ALEX FRANKS (April 30, 2014)

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