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The Luminist

David Rocklin
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The Luminist, by David Rocklin, explores the struggle to find one's place in the world when confined by society to an ill-fitting role in which one's dreams and abilities outshine what is acceptable—and what it means to break free from that imprisonment.

Set in mid-1800s Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), the book follows Catherine Colebrook, a woman fascinated by the dawning of scientific photography, and a teenage servant boy named Eligius. Catherine's passion to capture a singular moment in time begins with an image of her own son's still-birth. From that point, she maintains a controversial relationship with a fellow scientist, risking marriage and reputation.

Amid growing unrest that threatens British authority, Eligius enters Catherine's home and challenges her stereotypical thinking as she slowly recognizes his true character. He helps her advance the exploration of photography, which doesn't yet work, while uncovering his own scientific gifts. Along the way, Eligius must discover who he is. He doesn't fit in with the English colonials, who leave his people destitute, or with the angry men of his village, who try to coerce him to steal and kill. He fights to maintain his moral center, even as he labors to help his people and protect the family he serves. Meanwhile, Catherine also strives to maintain her true convictions, even when they jeopardize her husband Charles's career and the family's financial solvency.

Through it all, Catherine, Charles, and Eligius confront injustices despite having everything going against them: Charles's frail heath and diminished respect, Catherine's womanhood and lack of financial backing, and Eligius's place as a powerless servant. Most important, however, they must stop the murderous intents of Ceylon's insurgents, determined to destroy them all.

Rocklin reveals another aspect of the Victorian era and causes readers to question how hard they would fight to remain true to themselves. Although the ending feels rushed in spots, the book is otherwise well paced and compelling. It is often stark—fitting for the time and setting—yet his occasionally vivid descriptions spotlight powerful moments. Danger boils under the surface throughout, ready to explode. *The Luminist* highlights a moment in history when the world is transforming and the very fabric of society is being stretched in unforseen ways. It serves as a snapshot as vivid as those Catherine tries to create, intended to cause people to see things in new ways.
DIANE GARDNER (August 30, 2011)

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