



The Stark Beauty of Last Things

Céline Keating

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Céline Keating's lush, elegiac novel *The Stark Beauty of Last Things* limns Montauk in stunning prose and highlights loss, the transience of home, and the impermanence of human affections.

Revolving around a prized land parcel that's owned by a secretive local group whose members want to develop it for their individual benefits, this novel is sympathetic as it pits environmental concerns against real estate development. Local residents who need to "cash out" for affordable housing feel stuck; Montauk has become a luxury summer getaway for outsiders.

Into this politically-charged maelstrom enters Clancy, an outsider who was befriended by Otto ("Big Brother") when Clancy was a child bouncing between foster homes. When Otto (though he was already dying) dies following a forest fire, Clancy benefits from his will's "strange" conditions and is named the executor of Otto's estate. He will receive Otto's house (if Otto's estranged daughter, Theresa, refuses it); he will have the deciding vote when it comes to the Moorlands parcel, despite the scant clues available regarding Otto's intentions for the land. Because of these benefits, Clancy is suspected of foul play.

As if on Montauk's oceanic swells, Clancy is tossed between stakeholders as he tries to divine Otto's wishes. He interacts with Molly, another outsider who fell in love with Montauk. His budding feelings for Julianne, a married artist who runs a bungalow colony for summer renters, add spice to the tension, as does the hostility between Clancy and Theresa over the will. Clancy, Julianne, and Theresa's perspectives are soulful.

The book's secrets are revealed at a gradual pace—including about the fragility of people's emotional bonds. *The Stark Beauty of Last Things* is a novel about the meaning of home, mourning, and finding belonging in the loveliness of the natural world.

ELAINE CHIEW (September / October 2023)

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