

A Brief View from the Coastal Suite

Karen Hofmann

NeWest Press (Apr 15, 2021)

Softcover \$16.95 (312pp)

978-1-77439-017-7

Karen Hofmann's skillful, visceral novel *A Brief View from the Coastal Suite* follows a family through the early days of a financial crisis.

Though the 2008 financial crisis strikes Vancouver hard, the Lund siblings find ways to survive; some even seem to thrive. Mandalay juggles her art career with single parenthood, striving to prevent her twin sons from adopting their father's flaws; Cleo seems to have it all, including an architectural design job and a close family, but is actually throwing herself into work to distract herself from her marital struggles. Cliff shrinks from increasing strife with his mail-order bride, and with the trials of running a landscape business; his brother Ben proves self-centered and conniving.

Hofmann's prose is captivating. She excels at writing everyday scenes. Some thrum with tension; others are characterized by warmth. Her characters' reflections are variously evocative and familiar, as when Mandalay thinks about a childhood vacation spot, which she remembers as a "calligraphic flourish of forest and sand," a place of "pale dunes and shoreline."

But the siblings' drive to achieve financial security, even as the market threatens to nosedive, forces them into painful situations. Mandalay tries to counter the excessive lifestyle of her children's father, only to drive a wedge between them. Cleo's diversions precede her slipping into an affair. Cliff's company begins to crumble, putting strain on his already tense relationship. Each endures their obstacles in their own ways; each is methodical in considering what they would count as a happy ending.

Set during the financial crisis of the aughts, the empathetic novel *A Brief View from the Coastal Suite* finds complicated siblings confronting their personal dramas.

JOHN M. MURRAY (March / April 2021)

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