

The Free People's Village

Sim Kern

Levine Querido (Sep 12, 2023)

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A punk rock teacher is embroiled in a major protest movement in Sim Kern's involving speculative novel *The Free People's Village*.

Maddie is an English teacher. She has a crush on Red, who is trans and nonbinary. Red lives in the Lab, a communal living space and music venue owned by Fish, Maddie's boyfriend. This semi-peaceful coexistence shatters because of an eviction notice to the residents of the Lab, whose home is to be demolished to expand Houston's Eighth Ward. Thus, Maddie becomes an activist. But when the authorities use violence to shut down a rally, what started as a local initiative becomes national news.

The interpersonal drama between Maddie, Red, and Fish is compelling, but the action arrives when Maddie joins local protests and the Free People's Village is established. The diverse cast expands to include other residents of the Lab and neighborhood and protesters from near and far.

Maddie struggles with losing her religion, accepting her queerness, and being a white teacher in a majority Black neighborhood. While she's accustomed to reckoning with her whiteness in diverse spaces, Maddie also has to work through her fears of the concept, and the reality, of putting her life and livelihood on the line for a cause. Her radicalization is gradual, uncomfortable, and necessary. Her realizations about government and community care move her, and the book, from the perspective of a nervous outsider to that of a committed partner.

In addition to discussions of racial and class inequities, environmental justice, and substance abuse, the book also delves into society's views on sexual assault. The book uses these themes to illustrate complex social intersections; it maintains a delicate balance by not trying to separate the issues.

The Free People's Village is an enthralling novel that highlights social justice issues.

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (July / August 2023)

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