



## The Inhabitants

**Beth Castrodale**

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(258pp)

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*An inherited property, a child who sees ghostly presences, and a brooding, handsome love interest make The Inhabitants a Gothic treat.*

Combining Gothic and modern influences with intricate and sinuous pacing, Beth Castrodale's haunting novel *The Inhabitants* focuses on a New England mother-daughter duo who move into a historic house with spectral energy.

Nilda is an artist who works in portraiture and abstraction. She separated from her partner due to infidelity. Her daughter, Sidney, is a sensitive child who sleepwalks and has imaginary friends. When Nilda inherits a Victorian house in Vermont, they leave Boston for their "disquieting" new home. Built by a nineteenth-century architect, Nathaniel, the house showcases conventional design elements along with more unusual touches, like wooden faces carved into the fireplace mantels and porthole windows "set in strange places." Eccentric Nathaniel's journals and architectural models are also found in the house.

As a first-time property owner, Nilda lacks the emotional and financial wherewithal to deal with her new house's structural issues. Still, she tries to adjust to her peculiar, more isolated environment. The home's energy is unsettled, and objects break in mysterious ways. Helen, the nurturing yet pragmatic housekeeper, wears a hairstyle and clothing reminiscent of decades past. Meanwhile, a neighbor and chemistry professor, Graham, piques Nilda's romantic interest, even as he introduces enticing botanical cocktails and "tonics" to help with her with her artistic concentration.

Nilda is an engaging and complex heroine. She mourns the recent death of her mother, a talented glassblower, while carrying on her family's artistic traditions—and channeling her vengeful feelings into creative expression. But Graham's tonics soon have a deleterious effect on her well-being, calling her reliability into question. Indeed, as she grows suspicious of Graham, her otherwise purposeful behavior becomes muddled by doubt.

Though Nilda is the book's primary focus, the narrative shifts into the perspectives of others on occasion, including Sidney, Helen, and Graham. Sidney accepts her ghostly visions of Nathaniel as well as Alex, who's from the 1990s, without question, and Graham's charming front is exposed when his true pernicious and possessive thoughts are revealed.

The novel's tension is heightened by its Gothic mainstays, including a tempestuous, purging rainstorm near the novel's end. Amid flickering electrical lights and lashing Nor'easter winds, Graham's actions become melodramatic as he asserts control. Though the intriguing ending lacks sufficient preparatory grounding, its ultimate twist is compelling and speculative.

A story of contemporary sensibilities, haunting presences, and mystical concoctions, *The Inhabitants* is an engrossing and entrancing novel that blends familiar and distinctive elements.

MEG NOLA (August 7, 2024)

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