

## The States

**Norah Woodsey**

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*Eloquent and alluring, The States is a novel in which dreams crash into lived realities.*

A woman undergoes a dream experiment and confronts her future choices in Norah Woodsey's contemplative novel *The States*.

Tildy is an isolated middle daughter. Her father, the head of a New York cosmetics empire, has faced financial strain ever since he was widowed. Her siblings live with idle complaints. And their virtual AI assistant, who was created by Tildy's mother, intervenes in their affairs with commentary. When the chance to participate in a sleep lab test arises, Tildy joins in the hope that lucid dreaming will help her evade her misfit present—and return to Galway, where her intriguing past lover, Aidan, remains.

Though the sleep study's goal is to help with trauma therapy, Tildy's eagerness is personal: she's weary of her obedience to her clan and its burdensome lifestyle, which is about to change. Her dreams blend childhood memories with images of going to Ireland for a university job; there are questions about how much is illusory and how much real. The captivating idea that people have a measure of control over their own dreams results in subtle suspense.

Outside of her dream world, Tildy is driven by her routines. She works in data science, makes few lasting connections, and lives in her mother's former apartment. Equipped with a cap and electrodes, though, she's less restricted in her dreaming, which is at first presented in palpable, rational terms. As the story progresses, Tildy's ability to remain self-aware enough to reflect and remark on events, and to pick up where a previous dream had left off, reveals the extent to which this type of dreaming is different.

In time, Tildy meets Aidan again; there's an eloquent sense of their strained, unresolved early love. As she makes long-term plans for herself within her dreams—finding a cottage; making friends—she effects similar confidence in her waking life. The stakes rise when her New York life and her imaginary trip to Ireland clash, forcing a decision about her future.

The novel is clever in its explorations of escapism and wish fulfillment. Despite the allure of dreaming, Tildy's knowledge that real longings demand real actions also results in pain. However, within her introspective narration, secondary characters are rendered in simplified terms—including her family members, who are constituted most by their determination to hold onto their wealth. Indeed, Tildy's interactions with her family members reveal both her detachment and her habitual deference, so that once she moves to disentangle herself from them, it feels abrupt. Further, a subplot involving a scheming man's attentions is distracting.

In the atmospheric novel *The States*, a woman navigates her romantic regrets and embraces a new adventure.

KAREN RIGBY (January 7, 2024)

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