*Luminaries*, by Kristin Keane rev. by Daniel Dundas

Omnidawn

Kristin Keane is the author of *An Encyclopedia of Bending Time*, a memoir,as well as *Luminaries.* Her works have appeared in *The Washington Post, New England Review, TriQuarterly, Electric Literature,* and *Reading Research Quarterly* among others. Keane is a doctoral fellow at Stanford University where she studies the teaching and learning of literacy. *Luminaries* is a novella that won the Omnidawn 2019 Fabulist Fiction Contest, and it’s about a kleptomaniac in rehabilitation who can communicate with spirits at a camp for children who are grieving over the loss of their parents.

The Google definition of “luminary” is, “a person who inspires or influences others, especially one prominent in a particular sphere.” However, some synonyms for it are “leading light” and “guiding light,” which I believe is what Keane was going for as the main character, Agnes, becomes a light for the spirits she can speak with. However, the title is in the plural form, and I believe what makes it plural is the children Agnes helps. By taking care of them and helping them with their trauma, Agnes can put aside her thieving ways by the end of the story. Agnes had developed a need to steal as it gave her a rush of excitement she hadn’t felt before. However, she got caught, and was given her choice of community service. Either work at a food bank, a senior center, or as a gardener at a summer camp for grieving children. During her time at the camp, Agnes discovers she can see and speak with the spirits of the children’s parents/guardians and can act as a bridge between the two worlds by giving the spirit something of their respective child that has significance to them. Agnes must decide if it’s worth it to steal from the children to give the spirits the closure and peace they crave, while also dealing with the potential fallout of her marriage which came into question when Agnes was arrested.

*Luminaries* is a poignant and heartbreaking tale of grief and loss and how both children and adults deal with it in different ways. The children reenact scenes as best they can from their previous lives.

“On the first day of camp, a boy named Crimson wrapped an invisible noose around his neck, pulled the rope and bowed his head toward his lap as if suddenly asleep. He was demonstrating for a girl... what his mother had done to herself.”

The language and flow of the story is also something to commend. Keane does a good job at making the most out of each sentence by knowing how impactful the words should be. On page eleven, Keane writes, “Her mouth engorged with blood... her veins forking off from one another like cyan tributaries...” This is in response to Agnes’s stealing and how it affects her. The use of colorful, poetic language helps to tell us that this is something that Agnes can’t get enough of, and that she needs to continue this just to know what it feels like to be alive.

The tones are also just the right amount of dark and somber and mournful. Neither one feels like they go overboard, and the story does a good job at highlighting each one for an appropriate amount of time.

I do think the world-building could have been expanded upon, especially since this is a world where some people can talk with the dead, and Agnes’s relationships with the living could have been further explored. But, overall, *Luminaries* is an incredible read with a lot of heart and spirit that deserves a read-through.