

READER GUIDE: BRENT VAN STAALDUINEN'S SAINTS, UNEXPECTED

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Hello readers,

Thank you for choosing *Saints, Unexpected* for your book club, and inviting Mutton and her family into your homes and social circles.

I consider *Saints, Unexpected* to be a coming-of-age retrospective, where events take place in the present day but are told from twenty years hence. Mutton, our narrator and protagonist, is wrestling with the memories of her fifteenth summer, the summer that changed everything. Is it time to tell the story? Is it her story to tell? Should the story be told at all?

And it's an urban tale, set in downtown Hamilton which, like many post-industrial cities, is experiencing the upheaval of economic transition. So in addition to the universal challenges faced by fifteen-year-olds—uncertainty about the future, surging hormones, family issues, searching for identity, and so on—Mutton also confronts gentrification, income inequality, corruption, crime, addiction, displacement, pollution, and the myriad other challenges that define recovering urban centres. How do these issues impact Mutton, her family, and her neighbourhood?

All of this might raise questions, then, about the role of magic in the novel, particularly around the magic cubbyhole the family calls The Niche. Its literal function is simply to deliver one perfect item for one person each day, but what role does The Niche play in a figurative sense? How does its magic affect the family and its community? Does it solve or create more problems?

One of my first readers called *Saints, Unexpected* "hopeful." I'd agree. But I'd call it a difficult sort of hope, earned through struggle and without relying on easy answers. I'm grateful that my novel has the opportunity to challenge you, and perhaps earn your hope, too.

My best to you,
Brent van Staalduinen