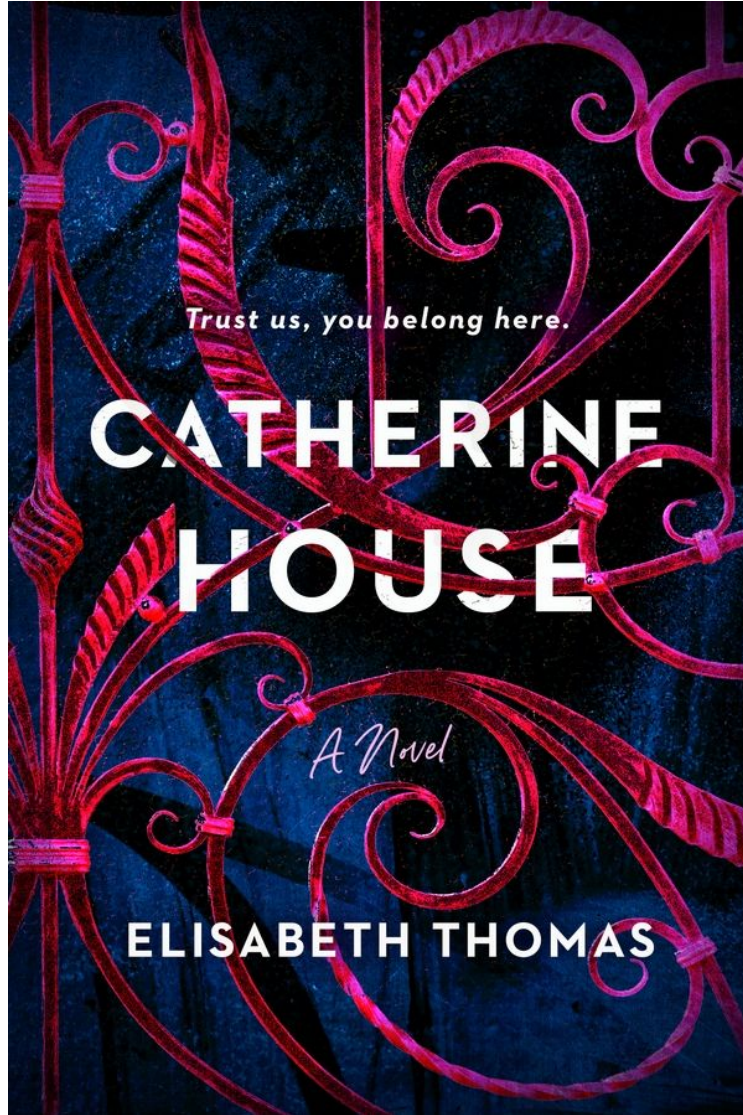


# Book review: In Elisabeth Thomas' 'Catherine House,' an exclusive university harbors sinister secrets



"Catherine House" by Elisabeth Thomas



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**"Catherine House" by Elisabeth Thomas (Custom House)**

Houses can be welcoming or forbidding; they might express their owners or oppress them. Sometimes they imprison or haunt or even inhabit their inhabitants. Catherine House does a little of all these things.

Elisabeth Thomas' debut novel, also called "Catherine House," is about an exclusive private university, but you might say it's also about an experiment in social distancing: Here it's done among one group of students and faculty over a period of three years. The outside world is kept at arm's length, although, as it turns out, the sickness is inside the house.

Like most of her classmates, Ines is on the run from her own demons and regrets. She barely passed high school after getting pulled into a spiral of drugs, parties and dissipation. After consulting with a trusted adviser, Ines applies to Catherine House in an act of desperation.

It's an extraordinary privilege to be accepted to the school. Politicians, judges, artists and presidents have passed through its halls. Its gracious, historic campus provides students with every need -- food, board and books. And tuition is free.

The exchange rate is steep, however. Incoming students must agree to cut off all ties with their previous lives. There are no trips home and no visitors. Not even keepsakes or little mementos are allowed. Students are provided standard issue clothing, along with new roommates and friends.

A meditation runs through the novel on the significance of individualism and free thought -- how "belonging" can become another facet of oppression. Ines flaunts the rules almost immediately when she helps her roommate Baby hide a snail in their room. This small,

subversive act aligns the two girls against the establishment, but they have no idea what they're up against. The school entices the most vulnerable sorts of young people, preying on their insecurities. Ines, who was brought up by an indifferent, indolent mother, craves the shelter of a family, and that is ostensibly what Catherine House seems to offer.

The faculty knows exactly how to market the school to vulnerable students. As Viktoria, the director, explains:

"To be unsure here is to belong. To be unsure but present and eager and open to a heroic new past, future, and today -- this is the Catherine project. This is how we research the most profound relationships between our bodies, minds, and worlds. The unsure place is where you are now and where you are meant to be."

At first, Ines barely studies and frequently skips classes. More lethargic than rebellious, she sleeps in and sleeps around, opting for private pleasures over communal belonging. Baby, on the other hand, is a model student, laboring over her classwork with a kind of rigid, petrified intensity. Like so many of the students there, Baby is chronically afraid she's not good enough, terrified she'll be exposed as an impostor.

With its cultlike fixation on control and secrecy, it's clear from the outset that something is deeply wrong with Catherine House. The narrative feels haunted by a sense of decay and fear. Ines is frightened by the mess of her own past and lulled by the sense of structure and hope that the school represents. Catherine House paints itself as a new kind of family home, along with a fun house mirror simulation of a "family."

Alternately stern and motherly, Viktoria creeps through the students' lives, offering a complicated kind of nurturing. More than mere teachers, the faculty are disciplinarians, visionaries and gurus.

At times, the narrative stretches a bit thin, repeating certain motifs as the characters roam the halls, entering one mysterious room after another. But the novel compensates for redundancy with some wonderfully horrific and truly shocking discoveries within these locked antechambers. There are shades of Edgar Allan Poe and Alfred Hitchcock as suspense builds in the winding corridors of the house and the twisting turns of the psyche. Moody and evocative as a fever dream, "Catherine House" is the sort of book that wraps itself around your brain, drawing you closer with each hypnotic step.

We root for Ines as she tracks the dark mysteries, pulled between her dream of home and her desire for freedom. The question is whether she'll be able to fledge from this dysfunctional nest or be smothered by it.

It may be that there's no place like home, but as "Catherine House" makes clear, sometimes that's a good thing.

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