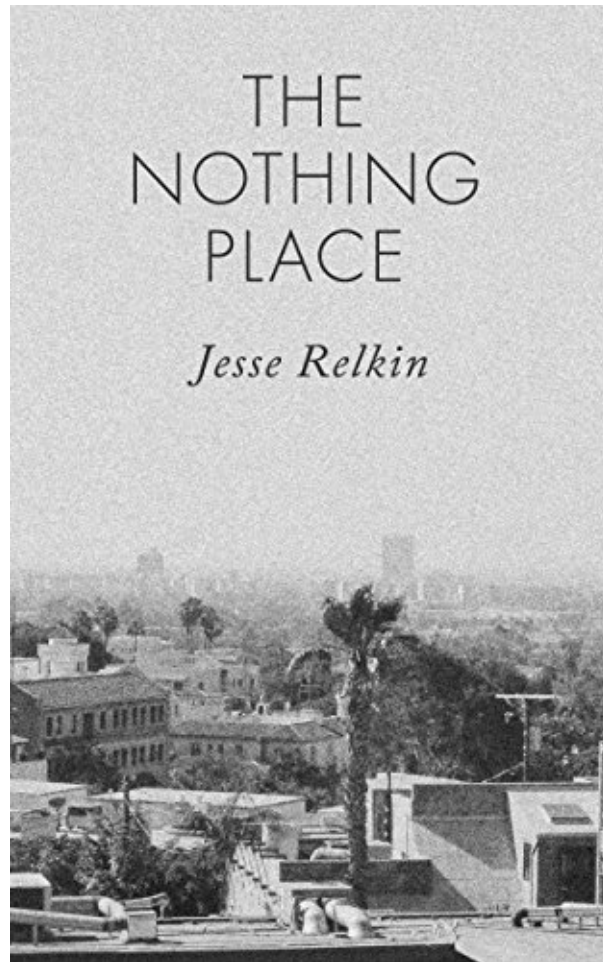


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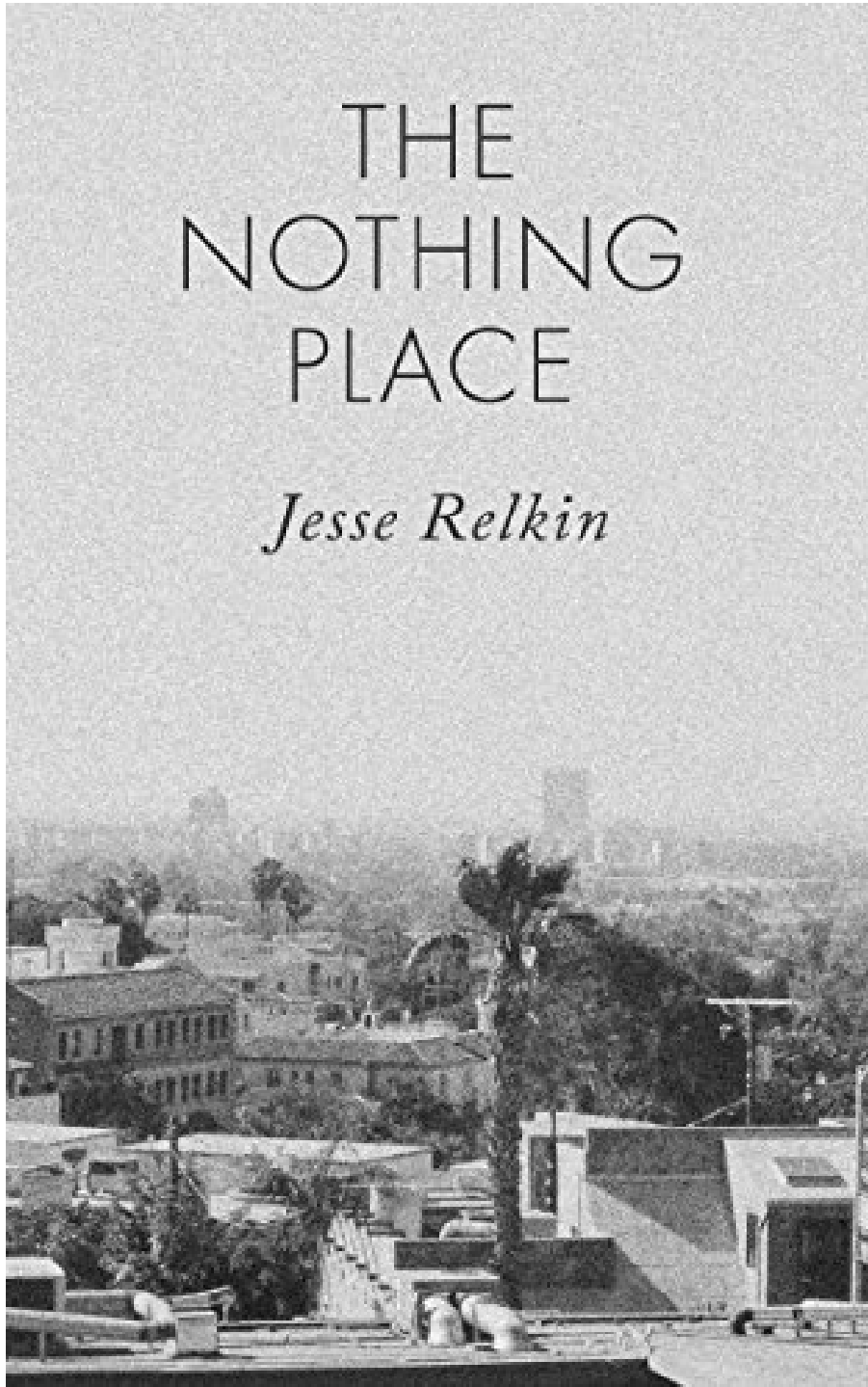


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Mixed up with drugs and kicked out of school, 16-year-old Max is shipped off by his parents from his small Oregon hometown to Los Angeles for an in-patient drug rehab program. He arrives a few days early to stay with his Aunt Mercedes, a single mom and mortgage broker raking it in during the 2004 California real estate boom. With four days left of freedom, Max is determined to get out of his aunt's apartment and live it up one last time in Hollywood. But Max isn't the only one looking to escape. His Aunt Mercedes's job is at stake due to illegal practices, and she has recently turned back to cocaine, which nearly killed her in her early-twenties. As their lives spiral out of control, a night in West Hollywood may just lead to their salvation.

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After getting the boot at school thanks to a precocious love affair with cocaine

By Jason Kushner

On the surface, *The Nothing Place* by Jesse Relkin is a simple coming-of-age novel about a young boy named Max who is forced to leave his home in Oregon for a stint of drug rehab in Los Angeles. But, a few chapters in, the reader realizes that this particular fiction debut is so much more than teen angst and substance abuse clichés.

After getting the boot at school thanks to a precocious love affair with cocaine, marijuana and alcohol, Max is sent by his mother to stay with his Aunt Mercedes – a pragmatic, hypocritical, and morally flexible matriarch with some addiction issues of her own. Under Aunt Mercedes' roof, we meet Max's brainy cousin Erin as well as their housekeeper Shannon and Mercedes' mooching boyfriend.

We get a chance to experience each main character's sphere of influences separately thereby introducing a slew of colorful tertiary figures hiding behind L.A.'s sunny façade. Relkin takes great care in treating us to mundane details that another young writer might've thrown away. And she has a good ear for realistic dialogue. We get to follow teenagers as they misbehave and try to fit in, but we also get lofty metaphors and inner monologues of poetry recitation. The exchanges never feel forced or stilted, and some interactions feel so unique and bizarre that they could've only come from real life.

Reviews of *The Nothing Place* have and will continue to invariably reference *The Catcher in the Rye*. Relkin even gives a nod to Salinger's signature work in the manic, stream-of-consciousness prose as a sort of kindred literary spirit. But there are many differences, and one that is key. *The Catcher in the Rye* is locked necessarily into Holden Caulfield's point-of-view whereas this book branches out to let the reader experience vignettes from a myriad of perspectives.

And in that sense, *The Nothing Place* is actually more akin to a handful of Los Angeles films that

brilliantly weave tapestry narratives around the city with their ensemble cast of characters. Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* and Paul Haggis' *Crash* are the first two that come to mind, but the proto-version--Robert Altman's epic adaptation of Raymond Carver's short stories *Short Cuts*--may provide the most apt comparison.

Like these cinematic landmarks, the *City of Angels* is, in fact, one of the main players here. And that is where *The Nothing Place* is at its best. It's the first-world temptations around Max and his family that eventually drive them towards some semblance of catharsis. Most importantly, Relkin is not afraid to call her characters out for the superficiality, materialism, and one-upmanship that have become endemic in West Hollywood. After all, incisive satire is the best form of judgment.

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