



The Glass Hotel, by Emily St. John Mandel
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, July 2020

The Glass Hotel, Canadian writer Emily St. John Mandel's acclaimed new novel, was published this spring just as the global pandemic was exploding. With its international Ponzi-scheme plotline set amid exotic locales, *The Glass Hotel* would seem a promising book choice for house-bound readers.

Hotel Caiette, a remote resort at the northeast tip of Vancouver Island, is "a glass-and-cedar palace at twilight, lights reflected on water, the shadows of the forest closing in." The hotel is accessible only by boat; there are no roads in or out. Well heeled guests "want to come to the wilderness, but they don't want to be *in* the wilderness. There's a certain demographic who will pay a great deal of money to escape temporarily from the modern world."

New York investment manager Jonathan Alkaitas had purchased the hotel when it was up for sale. Jonathan "carried himself with the tedious confidence of all people with money, that breezy assumption that no serious harm could come to him. He was a man utterly without bluster."

One evening, just before Jonathan was to arrive via speedboat, a guest nursing a drink in the hotel's lobby, spots a cryptic message scrawled in acid paste on a glass wall: *Why don't you swallow broken glass?* Walter, the manager, quickly intervenes, blocking the offending graffiti with a potted plant. Suspicion then falls on the night porter, Paul, whose half-sister Vincent Smith, the hotel's stunningly beautiful new bartender, had secured him his job.

When Jonathan, unaware of the incident, strides in and orders a drink from the bar, he is immediately taken with Vincent. (She had been named after the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay.) One thing leads to another; within a year Vincent is living with Jonathan, in what she calls "the kingdom of money."

The story moves back and forth in time, from Manhattan to Dubai and points beyond. Jonathan and Vincent live the high life, interfacing with wealthy clients. There's Faisal, an urbane Saudi prince, who coaxes his family to invest with Jonathan. Olivia Collins, an artist, and Lenny Xavier, a music producer, are among the many who entrust Jonathan with their funds.

The Glass Hotel features intriguing characters and an intricate plotline. Late in the story, however, when the mysterious message at Hotel Caiette finally is explained, the denouement seems anticlimactic. Nevertheless, for armchair travelers seeking pure escapism this summer, *The Glass Hotel* just might be the ticket.