

Byzantium

Ben Stroud

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A wide range of settings, deeply introspective characters, and dramatic plots reveal the powerful skills of this young writer.

A young writer's imaginative powers are amply displayed in this debut short story collection. These stories span time and space, in settings as diverse as ancient Byzantium, Havana in the era of slave labor, and contemporary East Texas. Ben Stroud's subject matter is equally diversified. Two linked stories ("The Don's Cinnamon" and "The Moor") chronicle the adventures of Jackson Hieronymus, a black private investigator somewhat incongruously plying his trade in Germany under Kaiser Wilhelm, while "The Traitor of Zion" tells the story of the slow awakening of a naïve American cult member in the 19th century. In the collection's title story, a nobleman's crippled and disgraced son is assigned a grisly mission in the court of Heraclitus.

Stroud does an admirable job of bringing these unusual settings to life, though at times the research threatens to overwhelm the stories' inherent drama, as in "Byzantium": "He had crushed the Persian king Chosroes, regained the eastern provinces, restored the True Cross to Jerusalem, and ordered the golden saddle of the general Shahrbaraz beaten into coins for the poor." A little of this goes a long way and at times undercuts the forward thrust of the narrative.

Yet, for all the exotic nature of these stories, some of the most affecting moments in Stroud's work occur in relatively domestic dramas. In the story "At Boquillas," two young people on a hike near the Rio Grande River attempt to distract themselves from tensions that threaten to capsize their marriage. Shelly, feeling diminished by her husband's joke that she has "such small dreams," is the first to admit to herself that things may already be lost: "She put away her meandering thoughts and asked him to repeat what he'd said. Because this too she'd learned from her parents' marriage: that you can make a mistake and not know it for years and years. And even more terrifying, never learn what the mistake was, just feel its misery coming down on you for the remainder of your life."

Stroud, a native of Texas, holds degrees from the University of Texas in Austin and the University of Michigan. He currently teaches English and creative writing at the University of Toledo. "Byzantium" received the 2012 Bread Loaf Writers' Conference Bakeless Fiction Prize.

This short story collection is likely to appeal to readers seeking an alternative to plot-less, heavily internal narratives in which nothing much happens. In Ben Stroud's *Byzantium*, from the days of ancient empire to a lumberyard in East Texas, a lot happens.

LEE POLEVOI (Fall 2013)

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