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General

Cities in the Sea
Maura Stanton
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Anyone who has ever packed a suitcase knows that the items we treasure most-Grandpa's broken wristwatch, Aunt Ida's chipped cameo-possess a value that transcends their practical use. Emotional connection with objects is the primary theme in this short-story collection, winner of the 2003 University of Michigan Literary Award. As the title suggests, the book draws inspiration from the Atlantis myth, examining the allure of relics and the way in which years-like ripples of water-blur the perception of the past.

It is fitting that four out of the ten stories take place near water-specifically, along the dilapidated resorts and swamps of the Gulf coast. In place of Athens's crumbling columns, the author forges ruins from among the dregs of Florida's golden years: pale floral sofas, rattan chairs, and silver lamé bikinis. In "Neptune's Palace," a souvenir shop clerk recalls the hurricane that destroyed the island resort where she worked as a teenager. Sailing over the site, she imagines her favorite villa still intact underwater with bittersweet humor: "Real jellyfish were staring at ceramic jellyfish on the walls."

Although the characters in Stanton's collection all mourn the loss of an era, the ways they cope vary significantly. A lonely housewife in "The House of Cleopatra," who witnesses the robbery of every home in her declining neighborhood, finally decides to pack her bags and leave the door open, in effect planning the very ruin she knows to be inevitable.

While most of Stanton's stories feature strong plots and character interactions, others lack the stylistic consistency that makes for a convincing tale. Much of the dialogue between the two main characters in "Glass House," for example, feels forced and overly explanatory, making it difficult to accept the close bond they are meant to achieve by the story's end.

Cities in the Sea marks Stanton's third collection of short stories, following Do Not Forsake Me, Oh My Darling and The Country I Come From. She has also published five poetry collections-most notably, Cries of Swimmers, which won a Writers' Choice award-and one

novel, Molly Companion. Her long list of accolades includes a Yale Series of Younger Poets award and two PEN Syndicated Fiction awards. She received her M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of Iowa in 1971 and currently teaches in the M.F.A. program at Indiana University.

Those with ties to the Midwest and Florida will particularly enjoy Stanton's rich settings and homespun characters. Ultimately, anyone who has ever lost a love, a home, or a dream will emerge from this reading experience with something intangible regained.

Aimee Sabo