

Graveyard of the Atlantic

Alyson Hagy

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North Carolina's coast is notorious in nautical lore for the number of ships and lives it has claimed. In this collection Hagy creates an equally grim coast where people come to bury their hopes. From a frustrated, awkward adolescent lacking a father figure to a caretaker husband worn out by his own patience to a Coastie coping with a failed rescue attempt, nearly all her characters are awash in personal, often internal struggle.

In "Brother, Unadorned," the story of an adult sister concerned over her adult brother's suppressed unhappiness, the sister, Annie, verging on bereftness herself, reflects: "I wanted to hear what my brother thought about the way cornered hearts gave in." Several characters in other stories exhibit cornered hearts as well. Aaron is the youthful native of Ocracoke Island who lends his knowledge to a troupe of snake hunters, hoping to become close with the sole woman on the expedition. Finding her affections already obligated - and her callous attitude about it, he abandons the endeavor. Thalia is a widow who's retreated to the coast and wards off personal attachments to protect herself from further grief.

In describing how the cornered hearts give in, Hagy uses vivid imagery, often matching her words to her seacoast setting. One fisherman is "a big man, wide enough to cover the top of a Coleman cooler with one haunch." A Coast Guard officer has "restlessness like it's a four-season allergy." The confession Thalia resists hearing from another is "the dribble of personal failure followed by a leak of hope."

In addition to the half-dozen stories set on the Carolina coast, Graveyard of the Atlantic contains one story set on the Great Lakes. "Search Bay" was selected to appear in Best American Short Stories 1997. Two other stories contain Great Lakes references, perhaps incorporating experiences Hagy had while studying at the University of Michigan. Like the others, "Search Bay" contains a solitary protagonist whose only regular companions are memories and might-have-beens.

As might be expected by the title, Graveyard of the Atlantic is a collection of rather dark stories. More accurately, it's a collection about some rather dark characters. Hagy, however, crafts their stories brilliantly.

CARI NOGA (May / June 2000)

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