

Islands on the Fringe: A Year of Micronesian Waves and Wanderers

S. Jacques Stratton

Phantasea Books (Dec 11, 2018)

Softcover \$12.49 (267pp)

978-0-692-19284-9

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S. Jacques Stratton's memoir, *Islands on the Fringe*, is a bursting-with-life account of living on a tiny Pacific island surrounded by even tinier atolls.

In 1999, nearing thirty and eager to put a broken engagement behind him, Stratton signed on to teach for a year at a college on Pohnpei, an island near the equator and one of the wettest spots on Earth. His memoir focuses on the people he met and other experiences from that time.

Self-consciously reconstructed through a haze of nostalgia, the book's disclaimers about the limits of Stratton's memories downplay the quality of its writing. Excerpts from diaries indicate improvement in this area, but both the new and the old texts are sharp-eyed in their observations. Recalled dialogues capture Stratton's sense of adventure, and he functions as an active cast member who's all in when it comes to telling his stories—even when it means revealing his mistakes.

Interest holds thanks to each chapter's fresh material. Some chapters focus on the atmosphere and landscape, with evocative descriptions of lush foliage and paradise views, while others are inside-the-barrel views of surfing. All introduce new characters, too. The cast is boisterous, and it grows at a steady pace, animating the book with its charm.

Stratton's Pacific is populated by educators, Peace Corps workers, volunteers and missionaries, well-heeled tourists, business men seeking deals with local tycoons, tour guides, beauty queens, and a vanishing breed of hardy adventurers who live off grid. They are captured in deft strokes and with gentle humor, as when a secretary—learning that Stratton, though from California, doesn't know Leonardo DiCaprio—scoffs, "I know everyone from my village!"

Photographs are inserted by the dozen, complementing the subject matter that surrounds them. They capture roads and residences, jungles and mountains, the surf and the endless ocean horizon.

As the book winds down, Stratton's stress begins to surface, and his annoyance peeks through. It lands on a pair of obnoxious tourists and comes through in a detailed outbreak of cholera. Homesickness takes over, and Stratton, declaring that he's drunk deep of Pohnpei's charms, decides to return home. His impressions of island life feel complete.

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SUSAN WAGGONER (April 3, 2019)

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