

## Stella Maris: And Other Key West Stories

**Michael Carroll**

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In Michael Carroll's *Stella Maris: And Other Key West Stories*, Key West is "a beautiful town ... the last bastion, the place of the just-misfits." This collection of eight short stories follows the people who go there looking to save their lives by losing them.

*Stella Maris* creates networks between found and fractured families as lives converge in Key West's distinctive space. The narrative perspective occasionally wobbles, shifting from an omniscient gaze to an individual perspective in stories like "Sugar and Gold," where poolside conversations blur the line between the observer and the observed. But Carroll's deep dives and complex community networks also reveal lives full of discontent, dissolution, sadness, and laissez-faire self-righteousness with surprisingly little difference between Key West's two sides: the gay men who flock there in droves and the vacationers in their MAGA hats looking for a safe, accessible paradise.

From the gay bathhouses to the rent boys, the cruise ships and tourist traps to the mangroves filled with the homeless, the high rise condos to the VA hospital, *Stella Maris* skewers societal decay on a personal level. Like lancing a boil, Carroll looses all the rancor and bitterness, shame and anger festering in the hearts of his characters. Money, sex, youth, and beauty are all types of currency, and everyone's desperate to have, flaunt, and spend them. What's sordid and tawdry is exposed as a pedestrian, communal obsession; Key West is just the place where everyone's forced to admit it.

Often brutal and painful, *Stella Maris* knifes into religion, whiteness, class, sex, beauty, Southernness, and aging at the margins of the United States's southernmost point. An intersection of what's crassly commercial and deeply personal, Carroll's Key West is tropical as an orange and just as perfumed and prone to rot.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (May/June 2019)

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