

The Iguana Tree

Michel Stone

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For Héctor, leaving behind the impoverished confines of Puerto Isadore, Mexico, to create a better life for himself and his family in the United States is an abiding dream. He sees America as “The Great Opportunity” and embarks on a risky border crossing to fulfill his aspiration. For Héctor’s wife, Lilia, America is the land of “The Unknown.” As she watches her husband depart, Lilia is left to wonder what will befall Héctor in that foreboding, distant place and if they and their baby, Alejandra, will ever be reunited as a family.

Héctor’s voyage to “*El Norte*” is indeed frightful. He hires a coyote to smuggle him over the border, and for thirteen days is held in a darkened shack without knowing if his guide will get him to America, desert him, or kill him. During his confinement Héctor befriends Miguel, a fellow border-crosser, and the two ultimately make it to South Carolina and find jobs as farm workers. Héctor rejoices in the notion that he can start saving money to pay for Lilia and Alejandra’s journey over the border.

In Mexico, Lilia grieves Héctor’s absence, and her loneliness is only alleviated by the boundless love she feels for her daughter. When a friend offers Lilia the opportunity to cross, she pounces on it—an impulsive, fateful decision that imperils Lilia and Héctor’s marriage and their hopes for enrichment.

Michel Stone’s debut novel is a memorable portrait of love and marriage, opportunity and consequence, determination and toil, goodwill and treachery. It strays—refreshingly so—from the formulaic coming-of-age story inherent in most debut novels and crafts a heart-rending, evocative, and measured chronicle of the mystifying “circle of life and the passions it arouse[s].”

Even though the topics of illegal immigration and undocumented workers in the US set the background for Stone’s tale, the book isn’t overtly political. Stone’s palpable, skillful prose prevails as its principal achievement. With a precise rendering of place and character, and a genuine, emotional poignancy, *The Iguana Tree* is noteworthy storytelling.

AMY O’LOUGHLIN (Spring 2012)

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