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HISTORICAL

The Last Paradise
Michael Kasenow
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Post-Civil War Galveston is the setting for this exquisitely written, character-rich debut novel by Michael Kasenow. The author masterfully paints a vivid picture of the "alley people" of the reconstruction-era Texas city: a colorful lot of rakes, con-men, prostitutes, drunks, adventurers, and honest workers of all races that lived on the back streets of the place that its wealthy inhabitants called "Paradise." Hard-working and willing to accept their lot as long as they could hope that the lives of their children would be better, Galveston's poor lived under Jim Crow attitudes and faced ill-treatment, brutality, humiliation, and the ever-present fear of retaliation by the Klan that kept open rebellion at bay. Yet a bigger threat loomed on the horizon-the 1900 hurricane that took more lives and caused greater destruction than has any other natural disaster in American history. That hurricane devastated what was then the third-richest city in America, and as is usually the case, it was the poor who took the brunt of the storm's fury.

Among Kasenows memorable and likeable characters are protagonist Maxwell Hayes, a complex, paradoxical man, and his friend Newt Haskins; heroic figures in spite of their all-too-obvious flaws, each man has an innate integrity that drives him to act against the racism, greed, and injustice that were propped up by wealth, power, and the force of law. The authors engaging depiction of Bishop and his wife Elma, a black couple, and their warm and welcoming family, makes their humiliation and the brutal death of their dreams at the hands of corrupt policemen and hooded night-raiders heart-searing. The nuns of St. Marys orphanage, each with her own less-than-stellar past, are strong, gentle, wise, and funny; they and Fanny, a sweet and surprisingly innocent young woman who supported her son by working as a prostitute, are contrasted with elegant Jenny Connor, who used her beauty to attract a wealthy husband out of greed and vanity, only to live a less-than-honest life in a loveless relationship.

The authors historical research and deep understanding of human nature and class stratification has allowed him to paint a vivid portrait of a grand city, as deeply flawed as its inhabitants and as vulnerable to the ravages of nature. His skillful plot development, ability to handle the counterpoint of multiple story lines, easy-flowing dialogue, and spot-on pacing all

make for a lively novel that is entertaining, thought-provoking, and moving. Kasenow's book is deeply satisfying in its scope and range, and above all, in its honoring of the beauty and resilience of the human spirit.

Michael Kasenow is a novelist, poet, and scientist who teaches Geology and Environmental Science at Eastern Michigan University. He has also written fourteen environmental science books.

Kristine Morris