

The Long and the Short of It: A Collection of Short Stories

RJ Stastny

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The Long and the Short of It is a charming LGBTQ+ short story collection that addresses life, death, and human connections.

Themes of joy, grief, adventure, and perseverance are detailed through a queer lens in RJ Stastny's short story collection *The Long and the Short of It*.

In these eleven stories, people form connections, deal with separations, and contend with everyday highs and lows. There are lighthearted entries but also mysterious and fantastical ones. Some evoke deep conversations regarding life and death.

Herein, queer characters seek connections with others, sometimes subtly. In "The Swim," a man bonds over flowers with his Guatemalan gardener and is greeted with a heartfelt gift upon the loss of his friend. With commentary on the AIDS pandemic, "The Hill" follows a man's visit with his partner, Kevin, on the same hill every few months as he reminisces about their past. After retirement, a man in "If" gets the opportunity to reimagine his life and see where different decisions would have led him.

The prose throughout the collection is casual and accessible—traits that extend to characters' conversations. However, the stories are also sometimes short on details to their own detriment: they explain what people have done or said in the past, but without much descriptive imagery to vivify these recollections. Often, the characters and scenes are underdeveloped, diminishing the power of tales with otherwise immersive themes.

The standout story in the collection is "Soufiane," with its alluring European setting, cozy retreat home, and sparkling countryside scenes. In it, a queer photographer attends an artist retreat and forms an intense bond with a fellow artist, Soufiane. Their relationship starts out rocky, as Soufiane keeps to himself amid judgement from the other retreat attendees; Will coaxes him from the shadows, instigating a powerful lifelong relationship. The entry is tender and evocative.

Conversely, "Crushing Confessions" differs in format from the rest of the stories in the collection. Its narrator is anonymous; the story is broken into different sections with individual titles, each dedicated to a different unrequited crush. It has the tenor of autofiction, and the deviation is jarring. Further, a handful of noticeable grammatical errors undermine the book somewhat. Nonetheless, the book on the whole is emotive, filled with flawed characters who pique strong responses in their audience.

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ALLISON JANICKI (April 10, 2023)

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