

The Summoning

Hemenway Stephens

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Two novellas with a comedic touch will attract adventurous readers looking for erotica variations.

In *The Summoning*, a mystical, generational link forges an erotic bond between nineteenth-century England and contemporary Ohio, placing an unusual cast of characters into a variety of sexual situations in two novellas. With well-timed humor, Hemenway Stephens succeeds in crafting a series of interludes but fails to grant a sense of dignity to the seductress in either of her original yet sexually compromising tales.

Though skillfully edited with comedic timing delivery, the stories subject a woman to a loss of self, making her an object to satisfy a man's cravings. Even if the outcome may lead to pleasure and a mutually respectful relationship with someone in the end, the initial situation detracts from the pursuit of enjoyment.

In the first novella, *The Clearing*, the daughter of an estate owner in nineteenth-century England turns herself into a prostitute, while her partner acts as a pimp, seeking her clients. Willing and without question an active participant, Anna engages in countless liaisons with eager men. These are sex transactions, and business is completed within old-world settings in anticipated and sometimes imaginative ways that may elicit laughter more than arousal.

Anna allows autonomy and control to pass into the hands of others, and while these manipulative experiences are consensual, the quality of the encounters cannot reach a particularly high mark from the perspective of a reader who values independence. The definition of sexual liberation is tested by the author throughout this novella.

In one scene, Anna's partner plays his role as her procurer: "He left her naked in the shed. She looked out the window, at the guests milling about. She saw Lord Frederick eyeing the shed, still in conversation with her father. Several minutes later, the door opened and Guillame escorted the other twin and then left. Anna could hear him turn the large iron key in the lock."

The Awakening, the second novella, explores the past through the pages of an old manuscript—titled *The Clearing*—hidden in the attic of a historic mansion in present-day Ohio. Melissa, the heroine of the story, finds the book and lives vicariously within its fictional realm, eventually transforming into a woman without inhibition. A supernatural connection across the centuries lends an eerie tone to Stephen's book, yet the women's liberation that follows does not live up to a reader's expectation, at least not from the standpoint of a staunch feminist.

The Summoning will attract adventurous readers looking for variations on the standard plots found in the erotica market—a trend that only increases in popularity as authors push established boundaries. Stephens debuts an approach to intimacy that will likely reach its targeted niche.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (September 23, 2013)

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