

Turn to Stone: An Ellie Stone Mystery

James W. Ziskin

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James W. Ziskin's *Turn to Stone* pulls Ellie, an enterprising reporter, into a slow-burning search for the truth behind a professor's reputation.

In 1963, Ellie is in Italy for a literature symposium. When the body of Professor Bondinelli, who organized the event, is found in the Arno River, his colleagues decide to continue on in his memory. At a weekend retreat, Ellie uncovers conflicting details about the professor, including that he wasn't always a devout Christian; she tries to find out what really happened to him.

Steeped in erudite banter, the novel unfolds over several days, leaning on gastronomic pleasures and heated conversation. Bondinelli's presence is felt through veiled hints at his wartime past, conveyed through retellings of the *The Decameron*. Painful histories and present-day revelations come home to roost in the prickly frisson between Ellie and Locanda, the retreat's brooding host, who displays an ability to attract and repel others with aloof calm. Other noteworthy characters include Bernie, Ellie's fellow American friend and wise foil, and Mariangela, Bondinelli's orphaned daughter whom Ellie takes under her wing.

The sparse plot hinges on contrivances, including a quarantine that forces everyone to stay at the retreat; a photograph; and an off-stage investigation that yields little information beyond a confirmation that Bondinelli's death was no accident. Ellie's ability to link details is a nod to her persistence more than to any remarkable sleuthing.

Italy's fascist period is presented in a multifaceted way that avoids assumptions about people's motives. The energetic, contentious relationships among Bondinelli's colleagues result in an academic edge, and Ellie's particulars are well divulged against the book's gorgeous, old-world backdrop. *Turn to Stone* is a thoughtful mystery that questions whether forgiveness is always possible.

KAREN RIGBY (January / February 2020)

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