



The Company of Heaven: Stories from Haiti (Iowa Short Fiction Award)

Marilène Phipps-Kettlewell

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Marilène Phipps-Kettlewell's award-winning stories transport you to Haiti—to a lush, lyrical, flamboyant, and spirit-filled Haiti where palm trees shine wet with moonlight and the sky paints a yellow screen over your head and the ocean sparkles with thousands of golden eyes—and keep you there forever. Her singular characters mysteriously address the deeper meanings of human existence. They also dream of escape, whether from themselves, from family, from Vodou, from financial and cultural difficulties and the politicians that create them, or from the country itself, but Haiti will forever remain part of their souls and part of the thoughts of her readers.

Some characters do achieve escape through the mind or through sea voyage—escape found by surrendering to spectacular fantasies and madness and love, bargaining with God, joining the boat people. Marie-Ange Saint-Jacques's mother sacrifices everything to ensure her daughter's survival on a perilous boat trip, Angelina waits to fly away to Nou Yòk, Vivi creates her own circus with dozens of rescued dogs, Gustave dies a martyr to his faith. Throughout, the "I" who moves in and out of these dream-filled stories embraces the heavenly mysteries found in "the room where all things lost are stored with grace."

We begin our journey to Haiti with images of a little girl in a pink bedroom reading by candlelight a book about the life of Saint Bernadette, surrounded by the bewitching scents, sounds, and textures of a Caribbean night. Each story stands by itself, but some characters can be followed from one story to another through the transformations they undergo as a result of their life experiences. In this way, the collection can be read as one story, the story of a family trapped in a personal and cultural drama and the story of the people with whom the family interacts, themselves burdened by the need to survive within Haiti's rigorously class-determined society and blessed by their relationship to the company of heaven in which they live and for which they are destined.

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