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Sea Change

***Deep Salt Water* by MARIANNE APOSTOLIDES**

BookThug, 2017 \$20.00

Reviewed by **JENNA GERSIE**

“I’ve never come to terms for this. Not yet. You’ll see” (20), writes Marianne Apostolides in her moving memoir, *Deep Salt Water*. The book is a reflection on an abortion the author had about twenty years prior to publication of the book and her reconnection with the man seventeen years after their unwanted pregnancy. As the title suggests, the memoir is not just about the author’s experience, but also includes well-researched yet poetic commentary on the loss of our global oceans as we have come to know and understand them. With poignant prose, the author connects these themes of loss.

The memoir is broken into three parts—one for each trimester of a full-term pregnancy—and thirty-seven sections—one for each week. Some sections are written lucidly, while most serve like prose poems that explore loss in sometimes tenebrous ways, allowing the reader to interpret the writing as her own intimate understanding of loss.

Paired with Apostolides’ writing are mixed-media collages by Catherine Mellinger, whose work is also seen on the front, back, and inside covers. Combining images of women’s bodies and the life found under the sea, Mellinger’s art perfectly complements the narrative. Women’s hair flows like that of mermaids, coral structures stretch to the surface like fingers reaching to grasp another’s hands, and seagrasses loop around bodies, making the viewer long to be caressed by the sea, or a lover.

In section one, Apostolides writes, “My water broke and the whole sea spilled. It came without warning: the gush of the ocean. A sac of grief floods cities and women” (11). Thus, from the very beginning, the author positions the reader to recognize that this work pairs an individual loss with global ecosystem and species loss, that though this work is a personal account of one woman’s story, women’s bodies are joined across experiences.

The personal is made accessible in brief snippets that serve to address commentary about women’s rights to their bodies and to “[reject] polarizing rhetoric” (back cover) about abortions, as in this passage:

What is the language to talk of abortion? The language of ‘rights’ is too limited: its logic and lawfulness place it firmly within the mundane. The mysterious crux of abortion, therefore, is denied. But the language of ‘ethics’ is slippery, sliding—so easily—inside the throat of religion. Unable to find the proper words, my only recourse is this plea: the prayer that someone will offer forgiveness. (41)

In most cases, Apostolides avoids the usual language used to talk about abortion, so when she clearly writes, “My personal was political [...] I wanted to tell her that I was grieving. That it was my right, and that part of that right was the right to grieve” (27), her statements stand out, filled with the power of a woman standing up for herself and her body.

Most of the language used in the memoir is less pointed and seems to be derived from the rhythm and lull of waves

or the sounds of bubbles reaching the surface, corals popping, or the songs of whales. Apostolides' lyrical sentences lull the reader, offering the comfort of placid seas to counteract the deep emotions derived from discussing difficult topics.

Apostolides writes the ocean like a womb: life-giving, yet also a place where death and dying are not unknown. In some passages, she describes birth:

I've never seen the mating of sea turtles [...] stingrays that fly with graceful menace. A whale is birthing underwater [...] thousands of fish swim like one sleek body. Jellies diaphanous, tropical luminous, corals that mesmer even the mermaids. (89)

In others, she shares devastation, as in this passage describing viewing a glacier in Alaska—

I faced the frozen edifice. The crevasse was yawning down the sheer; the ice glared blue from dense compression. Watching, waiting, for pieces to fall (78)

—or this one, in which she imagines a stark, but realistic, future—

We walk along the plastic beach. The sand is made from petroleum products: a speck of silver from bags of chips; the greenish zest from bottles of water. (137)

The author's observations are grounded in science. At the end of the memoir, she includes fourteen pages of notes about the research she has done on our oceans and the threats to their survival, from the origins of life and the haunting acoustics of whale song to species extinction, plastic pollution, oil spills, ocean acidification, and anthropogenic climate change. An extensive bibliography provides further reading to continue learning about ocean ecosystems and the effects of climate change on our blue planet.

Faced with these threats, Apostolides allows us to grieve, as is our right. And she recognizes that sometimes, grieving cannot be controlled. She writes, "The orbital angle of the moon will alter the rise. It's an ebb and a flow; it's a rhythmic cycle. Tides are predictable. Grief is not" (96). Whether coming to terms with the abortion she had years ago or recognizing the loss we've already witnessed in our oceans and the loss that is still to come, Apostolides acknowledges that grief is an essential part of the human experience when what you have loved is gone. Yet the love that is contained within her words—of the seas, of her unborn child, of the man she connects with so many years later—is the kind of love that is oceans deep.

JENNA GERSIE received her master's degree in environmental studies with a concentration in writing and communications from Green Mountain College. She is managing editor of *The Hopper*, copyeditor for *The Goose*, and an international educator and English teacher.