

House of Thieves

Kauai Hart Hemmings

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These unique stories of upper-class Hawaiian families reveal with unsentimental insight and straightforward prose the complex forces that bind family members together in love and hate.

Like the fierce, powerful, young characters that appear in her stories, Kaui Hart Hemmings demands our immediate attention. In this exciting debut collection of short stories, Hemmings establishes herself as one of the most original, unapologetic, and honest young voices to come out of the next batch of freshly schooled fiction writers. A member of upper-class Hawaiian society, she has set the beautiful island as a backdrop, indeed a foil, to describe the small torments and victories of growing up and finding one's place. Bold, frustrated teenagers and the adults who raise them wrestle with one another over the age-old issues of deprived freedom, misguided love, being cool, and being true, and they experience together the loneliness of feeling miserable in paradise.

Hemmings's tart, confident voice plunges us headfirst into the unfamiliar world of a Hawaii far from the tourist track, providing revealing glimpses of the island's divisive racial and class issues as well as the proud heritage of kings and warriors and the legacy of colonialists and missionaries. Her unceremonious dealing with issues like drugs, sex, and abandonment, and her entirely unselfconscious prose allow her stories to wash effortlessly over us like an ocean wave, always leaving behind an unusual shell, a curiously shaped rock--something to ponder that is fascinating and true.

A single mother's discovery of a pornographic magazine in her thirteen-year-old son's room sends her down a spiral of jealousy that ultimately guarantees her loss of him. A white man who is left by his native Hawaiian wife struggles to understand why he and his daughter, abandoned together, feel such deep resentment for each other. A boy who insists on the illusion of his happy family suddenly recognizes his father's lack of real love and comes to the understanding that certain things are severed and they can't grow again, the acknowledgment of the waste that comes from loving a place that doesn't love you back.

The stories in *House of Thieves* are told from varied points of view--a father, a child, a young woman, an adolescent boy, and more. Rooted in the circumstances and situations of island people, Hemmings's sharp and entertaining stories reveal the mundane cycle of small tragedies and victories that make up the lives of ordinary people everywhere.

House of Thieves Details

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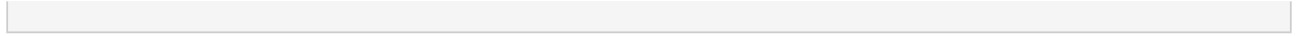
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From Reader Review House of Thieves for online ebook

Laurie Hanan says

I'll say right off I'm a big fan of this Kauai's writing. I read this book because I was intrigued to learn it contains the short story which later became *The Descendants*. Throughout the book she realistically portrays every range of human emotions as her characters deal with situations and relationships that run from uncomfortable to gut wrenching. Yes, the back drop is scenic Hawaii and the characters are decidedly upper class. But they could be you or me, regardless of who we are or where we live. There are no tidy endings for this author; each story leaves the reader shaken, and wanting more.

Kawai says

There's much to be impressed with in Hemmings' debut collection of short stories. Hemmings, a former Stegner Fellow who went on to write the novel *THE DESCENDANTS* (also made into a movie starring George Clooney), clearly has a studied hand. The prose is generally clean and unadorned, but still finds its poetic breath; the characters are often surprising and frequently in crisis. The backdrop (Hawai'i) is probably intriguing to the vast majority of readers, whether they were born and raised there like myself, or merely casual visitors.

However, as a collection and as individual stories, the work exhibited a lot to be desired. The most glaring problem I found was with the motivations and personalities of the characters. More than a few of the stories contained a sullen, rebellious, vulgar teenage girl as one of the central characters, such that it started to feel like a writerly tick (we all have them); people in the stories also spoke and behaved in such unnatural, hard-to-believe ways that it was difficult not to feel the author's hand forcing the plot. It was also hard not to feel a certain bias of perspective, with virtually all of the stories centered on the affluent of the islands, which deprives many readers of the possibility of truly seeing a cross-section of the islands.

Still, there are some gems here. "The Minor Wars", "House of Thieves", "Begin With an Outline", and "Location Scouts" were among my favorites, and it's easy to see why Hemmings worked her first novel around the characters and situation presented in "The Minor Wars".

It's been a long time since I read anything by an author from Hawai'i, and despite whatever criticisms I might have mentioned here, I was happy to have read this collection.

Larry Dunlap says

I absolutely love everything Kuai Hart Jennings writes, and this collection of stories is no exception. These glimpses into the young people in the upscale Hawaiian communities show the normalcy of growing up in this exotic tropical paradise for what it is, not necessarily so different than anywhere else.

Meredith Enos says

This is the first work I've read by Hemmings. We are about the same age, and we went to rival high schools,

and know some people in common--and the thing that struck me the most is just how different her Hawai'i is/was from mine. The wealth is a part of it (I don't think it's a spoiler if I tell you this collection could also be titled, *The 1%ers of Hawai'i*), as is the casual racism, the lifestyles, the willful ignorance and misinformation, the way Hawai'i and its people and cultures are just props. At this point, I can't tell if this voice is intentional from Hemmings, or if it's her worldview and she's merely giving voice to it, because all the stories read similarly.

These are the themes I found. Feel free to disagree:

- Sullen, knowing adolescent daughter with long, light brown hair
- Groups of hard living young adolescent girls
- Philandering dad
- Calculative/manipulative women
- Women trying to marry up
- Sad, cold, rich, snobby, white people
- Minorities as servants, radicals, or druggies
- Incest
- Father/daughter, mother/son issues
- One parent always missing
- Foreignness

The only people who have any agency or self-awareness or internal life are the knowing teenage girls. It's tiring, all the fumbling around that happens, all the people not saying things, all the truths belligerently revealed, all the things that don't quite happen.

Also, because of the tone, I can't tell if the narrative voice--the whole damn set up, really--is genius, or atonal from lack of perspective. Seems like, in this specific slice of the populace, she is pitch perfect, and the criticisms I have regarding place (these stories seem like they could be happening anywhere--easy setting because she's from O'ahu, or the perfect encapsulation of the disregard these characters for what's around them, from the place to their families?), minorities (they only appear as domestics or druggies or radicals--ridiculous stereotyping, or a way to show how self-involved these characters are?), wealth (omg so much entitlement, but is it just a way to show how removed they are from each other and the world?), and more.

I read a lot of Hawai'i literature, but historical and contemporary, from local authors. This book is not like any of those books, and the characters are not relatable local characters. This really reads like contemporary American fiction, where the hook is that, instead of rich white people in Martha's Vineyard, it's rich white people in Hawai'i. With a Hawaiian reference or two thrown in. One of the things that come through the strongest is that these characters know they are foreign. They measure it in their mixed kids' features, their super white activities (sukiyaki night? shudder). They understand the undercurrents of status, race, and wealth--and channel them to advantage, even the kids. And in her own upbringing, so has Hemmings (her step father was a pro surfer-turned-politician; exclusive private school, Stegner, etc.). She is a talented writer, and her prose is both crisp and poetic, and she has clearly made the most of the opportunities she has been given. I just think it's problematic that the most successful author of contemporary Hawai'i fiction tells stories of rich, white people (and is that because her talent is so huge, or her version of Hawai'i is palatable to the fiction market?).

So at this point I don't know if it's artistic voice, or author identity--how much is calculated, how much is talent, how much is craft. If there was a story here that cut across that narrative, or had a different voice or ending or flow, something to cleanse the palate, I would be able to see if it's genius, or if Hemmings has found an angle to work and is just going for it.

Molly says

Not all stories were 5 stars, but I love her writing, so I am rounding up!

Pua Hawai'i Book Blog says

Hemmings writes her stories with a tight narration, carefully choosing her words--stinging when she needs to and pulling back before the pain overwhelms. I found most of the stories easy to read and engaging, and in many cases consider them a different kind of escape. Instead of losing myself in a world of fantastic discovery, I found myself perversely enjoying entering into the thoughts of these characters and enduring the often awkward and frustrating attempts to connect in their stressed associations.

Read the full review here: <http://www.hawaiiobookblog.com/article...>

Paula says

Not a fan of the short story but these gripped me from the first sentence.

Ms says

This book is somewhat unsettling. It is very good, and Kai is a bright young author, but be aware that the stories do not end where you'd think/hope they might. I am looking forward to reading her newest release.

Katie Saesan says

I love reading Kai Hart Hemmings's work because they make me homesick for Hawaii, but her storytelling is also really incredible.

Maile says

Kai Hart Hemmings makes me uncomfortable. Her stories are lovely: funny, clever dialogue; surprising characters; smart and engaging plots. One of my favorite bits from *Minor Wars*:

"Oh, mercy. I need to change some habits. I'm an ass," I say.

"You're my dad," Scottie says.

"Yes," I say. "Yes."

"You're a dad-ass. Like a bad-ass but older."

"Mercy," I say.

She makes good jokes. What leaves me unsettled about this book is that I don't recognize the Hawaii she writes here. At the heart of each of these stories is a wealthy white family. There is a pro-surfer turned Republican state senator; a lot of teenagers dealing with their parents' divorce or estranged siblings; a lot of adults dealing with love of someone from another culture. I can see that this Hawaii exists: I went to Punahou, I drive by the Waimanalo polo fields, I overhear Kailua wives talking about their timeshare options. It is interesting to have a smart, self-deprecating inside look at how the other half lives in Hawaii.

It just leaves me wanting in so many respects. One character resents his brother because he has stayed to take care of the family while the brother has been free to make lots of money. That's recognizably a Hawaii problem to me. But the plot moves past tidbits like these so quickly it's hard to feel they're explored fully. Maybe that's the limitation of short stories. Then again, maybe I'm looking too hard here for the book I need to write.

Joseph Street says

Not as uniformly enjoyable as "The Descendants", but still an fine collection of keenly observed, cutting stories about the bonds and betrayals within families. Interestingly, the story that later became "The Descendants" (called "Minor Wars") is among the weaker offerings -- it lacks the spark and warmth of the novel. The peculiar insularity of island culture and the still-festering grievances of Hawaiian history provide a crucial background -- the stories are universal in the sense that these types of dramas could be set anywhere, but the Hawaiian setting heightens the sense of constraint and, at times, desperation, that fills these stories.

Christina says

I enjoyed the finely crafted prose and insider perspective on what it's really like to live in Hawaii. But is there some rule that short story protagonists have to be unappealing? Because we wouldn't spend a novel's worth of time with characters this unappealing but authors figure a short story is the right amount of time? That's my operating theory after reading this collection. Some characters were lovely and all were well-done and complicated, but I grew weary of spending time with the selfish, messed up ones.

Byron says

Collection of short stories by the author of *The Descendants*, which was adapted into the Alexander Payne film starring George Clooney. (I haven't seen it yet, nor have I read the novel. I need to get on both like yesterday.) The novel was based on the first story in this collection, *The Minor Wars*. I enjoyed the whole damn thing. I'd describe it as a sort of Hawaiian equivalent of that movie *The Ice Storm*, set in the late '80s/early '90s, against a beautiful, semi-exotic backdrop like the one on the cover. Lots of broken, fairly well-off families, kids who don't get along with their parents, sometimes white, sometimes native Hawaiian, sometimes a little bit of both - or else this would be the textbook definition of white people problems. Don't go anywhere near this if you don't like the idea of people who have a lot of money who are somehow sad.

Otherwise, have at it.

MaryJo Gingras says

Did not enjoy this book. It is a series of short stories that are not connected and don't really have good plots.

Abuela Linda says

Written by the author of "The Descendants," House of Thieves consists of short stories about people who live in Hawaii, and live lives of separation, longing, loneliness, loss and basically broken lives. I wish there could have been one happy ending. My tolerance for depression is pretty high, but this book tested that tolerance. While I was reading this book, I felt like a voyeur, like someone listening next to a fence to stories unfolding in a house/garden next door--and not for public consumption. One sees intimate glimpses of lives and emotional damage and pain. I thought a book about Hawaii would be a pleasant summer read, and I am glad I read it, but it was not a "summer" read.
