

Review of Paul Montaigu's A Stoic's Sketches

A Stoic's Sketches by Paul Montaigu is a collection of short stories and smaller texts that neatly blend realistic observation with surprising historical detail and a touch of the fantastic. Known for his romantic poetry and penchant for historical crime fiction, the thirteen year old writer here takes a break from his beloved detective stories and branches out to explore different styles and subjects.

The first section of the book enlightens the reader on the history of Stowe House. Constructed in the Seventeenth Century, the noble estate once served as the setting for dramatic episodes in European history: Louis Phillipe-Albert, the Duke of Orléans and heir to the French Throne, died here in 1894, further rocking the already shaky foundations of the French monarchy. Since 1922, the building is of course home to The Stowe School, the prestigious public institution.

In "The Forgotten Tales: The Long-lost Stories of a Lost Land" Mr. Montaigu gives the reader a tour of Ostroco, a fictional country, which he has in a Tolkienian manner supplied with its own royal history as well as a hand-illustrated cartography, while the experimental poem "The Glumphoshaak!" evokes the linguistic playfulness of Lewis Carroll's wonderland.

Perhaps the most touching aspect of the book, however, is the short story titled "Twelve Days in the Swamp". The young writer here explores the particularities of his own most unusual upbringing among young writers, artists and other intellectuals in his father's art community in Paris. Originally scheduled to be a stay in order to develop his artistic skills by landscaping in the swamps near Versaille – an activity he describes as most dreadful – the story instead develops in the manner of a travel diary. Mr. Montaigu uses the occasion to dissect in a witty and utmost hilarious manner the peculiar customs and characters he encounters at the house as he spends time among this group of international art students.

Throughout the book Mr. Montaigu stays true to his particular style. Writing in English as his second language, he has nevertheless developed a voice that is as polished and elegant as some of his notable influences, Keats, Wilde, and Conan Doyle, though never as tedious as some of their aforementioned works. In addition, one cannot help but be astounded by the sharpness of his observations. There's an amusing lightness to his descriptions that makes this book a pleasant and immersive read, best enjoyed on a rainy afternoon with a cup of Earl Grey tea.

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