

The Man in the Banana Trees

Marguerite Sheffer

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Marguerite Sheffer's short story anthology *The Man in the Banana Trees* centers on wreckage and restoration.

Many of the stories evince interest in the psychology behind science. In "Rickey," a teacher struggles to regulate a robot "puppet student"; their forceful attempts to integrate it with the human children are destructive. Elsewhere, supernatural elements are used to sympathize with persistent historical loss. A ghost in "*En Plein Air*" haunts the island where her artists' colony was based; her determined attempts to force acknowledgment of her existence and forgotten artwork on its visitors unearths her own blindness to others' secrets.

These sensitive vignettes grieve castaways and stolen people. In "The Man in the Banana Trees," a woman mourns her miscarriage of twins, envisioning a malicious demon that snatches away joy. Fragmented introspection and self-referential documentation narrate her loss—a submersion in the rejuvenating but aching potential of creation and storytelling: "I prick my finger on the spinning wheel of my thoughts ... to spin it into this story, give it a glint, offer it up as something worthwhile: an artifact, a thing that is buriable because it is at least written down, more or less corporeal."

Always humanistic, some of the stories are cautionary and angry. "At the Moment of Condensation" satirizes a greedy corporation's faux benevolence when demanding the arraignment of water thieves, though the natural resource is essential to life. Criticizing irresponsible application of inhuman algorithms, "In the Style of Miriam Ackerman" follows a man's sabotage of a photography exhibition where artificial intelligence reduces the eccentricity and subjectivity of his aunt's work into unfeeling, reproducible patterns.

Combining fantasy, history, futurism, and contemporaneity, *The Man in the Banana Trees* is a mesmerizing and eclectic short story collection that experiments with fabrication, discovery, and human nature.

ISABELLA ZHOU (November / December 2024)

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