

The Way of the Saints

Elizabeth Engelman

Southeast Missouri State University Press (Sep 1, 2021)

Softcover \$18.00 (212pp)

978-1-73301-533-2

Based on Elizabeth Engelman's family history and experiences growing up as the daughter of a Santeria priestess, the short story collection *The Way of the Saints* charts Puerto Rico's history of colonization, revolution, migration, and regimes through three generations of the Cruz family. Too unflinching to offer easy redemptions, the collection captures the devastating vulnerability hidden just behind the ever-present scrim of rage and fear that permeates even the most heinous of the Cruz family's actions.

The book begins with the family patriarch's childhood serving as a vessel for an *espiritista* in the 1920s, and culminates in the late 1980s, with his granddaughter's liberation from family trauma through the act of storytelling. In *The Way of the Saints*, "you can't outrun the stories that make you," even if they're all lies told "to get to the truth of things."

Skipping through time, the stories' arrangement creates a hall of mirrors where the actions of one generation repeat slantwise in the next. Particularly for the women, family trauma becomes de facto destiny. They become targets of abusive personal and social controls that often turn to violence. Forced into impossible scenarios and left with too few, if any, options, being both a secret keeper and a deceiver becomes a survival strategy and legacy.

This alternative Puerto Rican history is rooted in the nearer world of family, and the results are both intimate and unbearable. Whether it's the rape of Taino women by the Spanish or antinationalist violence in the 1950s, or whether it's domestic violence meted out in kitchens from New York City to the island or the demanding salves of Christianity and Santeria, "fear is a presence, a phantom. It takes possession, and no matter how hard you resist, it isn't removed by force."

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (September / October 2021)

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