Deep Salt Water by Marianne Apostolides

Jenna Gersie
Sea Change

*Deep Salt Water* by MARIANNE APOSTOLIDES
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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.

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