



Bay of Souls

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A new novel from an American master, Bay of Souls is a gripping tale of romantic obsession set against the backdrop of an island revolution. Michael Ahearn is a midwestern English professor who abandons his comfortable life when he becomes obsessed with a new colleague from the Caribbean, Lara Purcell. When Lara claims a vodoun spirit has taken possession of her soul, Michael follows her to her native St. Trinity, only to find himself in a whirlpool of Third World corruption. A finely wrought tale of one man's moral dissolution, Bay of Souls showcases Robert Stone at his most provocative and psychologically acute.

Bay of Souls Details

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From Reader Review Bay of Souls for online ebook

Race Bannon Berns says

Not so good.

Bland prose, bland plot.

Leslie says

Robert Stone, one of my favorite authors, has written a novel which is clearly unworthy of his great talents. The book has a thrown-together quality, as one improbable incident follows another. The characters are not fully developed, and their motivation is unclear. It almost seems like Mr. Stone just decided that he wanted to write a book that was exciting, frightening, and sexy. Start with a sensitive family drama, then add a little in-the-know power politics, a near death experience while searching undersea for lost emeralds, some terrifying Colombian drug dealers, and end with wild voodoo ceremonies and the wreckage of his home life. What have you got? That's the question.

Steve Chaput says

About a decade ago Richard Dreyfuss starred in a short-lived television show called "The Education of Max Bickford." Dreyfuss played Bickford, an aging professor at a small New England college. Fairly comfortable in his academic position, Bickford still felt unfulfilled emotionally and found that he had lost touch with the Jewish faith of his youth.

Imagine now Russell Crowe in the Dreyfuss role and his college transplanted to the Midwest, or, as he refers to it at one point, "Flyover Land." In Stone's novel, the professor's name is Michael Ahearn and the faith from which he feels estranged is Catholicism. Ahearn feels a growing emptiness inside, as well as a growing alienation from his wife and son. Even the near death by overexposure of his son doesn't bring them closer, rather just the opposite.

The only things that Michael seems to enjoy are drinking and hunting with some fellow academics. Even at those points the pleasure is mixed as Ahearn often doesn't even fire his rifle, allowing the others to do the work of killing.

Into Michael's life steps Lara Purcell, a new political science professor with a mysterious past. It's not long before Michael and Lara are lovers, but there is more to Lara's past than simply an absent husband. Lara and her late brother were not only involved in espionage, but also drug smuggling and voodoo. In fact, Lara believes that her brother had given her soul away to a voodoo priestess when she was a child. Now that he is dead she wants to get it back.

Stone is best known for his novel "Dog Soldiers," which was turned into the film "Who'll Stop the Rain" with Nick Nolte. As in that novel, Stone allows his protagonist to be drawn into a situation that not only places his life in danger, but also forces him to learn things about himself that he may not have wanted to know.

While a number of reviewers and critics find comparisons to Hemingway and Graham Greene in Stone's writing, I personally think any such similarity is a stretch. He does touch upon their themes of an outsider caught in an exotic and dangerous situation, but fails, for the most part, in bringing the reader a real sense of place. In the case of Hemingway, at least his stories remained coherent, no matter how introspective he allowed his protagonist to become.

Unfortunately, Stone can't bring any of these characters to life, and the book reads like a morality play. Reminiscent of the early Peter Benchley, Stone is at his best in the few action scenes. In those sections, especially those cinematic chapters dealing with a night dive to recover lost property in a downed airplane, it is easy to see why the author does have a loyal following. Overall, though, this reads like the early draft of a longer novel Stone wasn't able to complete before his deadline.

James says

Robert Stone is a master writer and Bay of Souls is one of his later novels. Michael Ahearn is a professor who goes off on a hunting trip with a few colleagues and comes back to a family crisis. Ahearn struggles with the aftermath and continues the duties of his professorship, which includes supervising a beautiful, young doctoral student, Phyllis Strom. Phyllis needs a committee to review her work and she requests that he reach out to another professor, Lara Purcell. Lara is brilliant and athletic, truly a femme fatale. Ahearn is drawn to her and soon gets caught up in the mystery life that grows from her past. She convinces him to join her for a visit to an island which is in the throes of revolution, a place she'd lived when she was growing up. Ahearn soon realizes he's caught up in politics and strange ceremonies he doesn't understand and Lara seems to be a different person when unmoored from the world of academia. The story moves quickly but in mysterious ways and Ahearn is forced to make choices for which he has no roadmap. Stone brings the reader into this heart of darkness and we sense that Ahearn's life will change forever as he follows Lara along this twisting path.

Jen says

it's like everyone in this book was in a Least Likable Character Ever contest.

Lukasz Pruski says

"The whole world of otherness was waiting for him there [...] It was no place for him." That's what Robert Stone writes about the protagonist of his novel "Bay of Souls" who visits a Caribbean island. Unfortunately, this "world of otherness" makes the novel no place for me. I am heavily allergic to possessions of souls by evil spirits, soul reclaiming rituals, and most of all, to Caribbean vodoun. Of course, many readers enjoy supernatural elements in literature; they will probably like the novel more than I did.

Michael Ahearn is an English professor at a mid-Western university. He lives a relatively happy if boring life with his wife and son. A beautiful and mysterious Caribbean-born Lara joins the faculty. Michael becomes totally infatuated with her and a frenzied love affair commences. When Lara asks Michael to accompany her to her native island of St. Trinity to participate in traditional rites on the occasion of memorial service for her brother, he readily agrees. The island is torn by political unrest, and corruption and drug smuggling are rampant. And then we have the whole thing with vodoun, rites, evil spirits and places where "untended souls await visitation, salvation, home." Gritting my teeth I managed to get through the St. Trinity episode (over 100 pages); enjoying only the passages on diving (no souls here, just the good old real life). Back in mid-West Michael faces the consequences of his transgression.

I really like the fragments of the novel that happen outside St. Trinity. There are some powerful and well-

written scenes. The memorable wheelbarrow incident during the hunting trip and the post-St. Trinity passages show that Mr. Stone is an accomplished writer. I just wish there were no Lara in the novel. In a way the book reminds me of "Deer Hunter", the famous movie about Vietnam War. I vividly remember the magnificent pre-Vietnam and post-Vietnam sequences in the film. Nothing else.

Two stars.

Peter says

Life is too short to persevere with this book. I haven't read anything by this author before and don't know anything about him but it appears to be written by an english professor. Technically good but the characters are unbelievable and the plot make no sense to me. I usually finish books but this one is going back on the shelf half read.

Steven Mirkin says

Minor Stone, but even his lesser work is better than most other authors' best. Bay of Souls is a short book, but it takes a while for the Stone to get the gears of the book in motion. The early sections feel both underferd and overwritten, including an embarrassingly overheated sex scene, complete with a politically charged bout of auto-asphyxiation.

Once the book moves to St. Trinity, a troubled Caribbean island roiled by a U.S.-backed junta, Stone is on surer ground.

Tucker Stone says

If there's one particular plot that has a tendency to write itself whether anyone wants to read it again or not, it's the one where a man cheats on his wife with an unbelievably sexy woman who transitions from an almost feral cool to 100% freakshow crazypants right around the time he decides to fully bail on his marriage. One doesn't even have to seek these sorts of books out, they just bubble up everywhere, like a sunburn on a redhead. You wade through them, tolerating the portions where he impotently struggles with whether or not he should pretend to feel guilty, waiting for the part where he makes some terrible decision to sneak a weekend away with his perfect little time bomb. What will the confrontation be like? How will his young son react to the news of his father's choices? In the hands of a great author, this sort of tedium can be skillfully redeemed by the characters, the setting, even the prose itself. It's heavy lifting, but it can be done, and Robert Stone is a heavy lifter.

This one seems to have gotten away from him. There's moments--blips, really--where the terminology of international espionage miscellany and alcoholic journalism expand the pages outward into a better story, as if they were an old fashioned fireplace bellows of seriousness. Snuck in by characters that ring of cliché--a cocky reporter or a death-drenched cartel kingpin--you'll sense a tale of more depth, but it leaves as abruptly as their behavior was introduced. The finest portion of the book, where Charles Dicken's Madame Defarge is recast as a voodoo priestess who is also, somehow, the long arm of druglords, isn't even graced with an ending, it's just abandoned. You're stuck riding around in the back pocket of another cranky professor-type

with a 40-something hard-on lost in a world his academia didn't prepare him for. If you aren't tired of those yet, fine. But if you aren't tired of those yet, you probably don't read that much in the first place.

John Eakins says

This my third Robert Stone read. I started reading him because of something I read: something positive, I thought. While there are lots of authors with awards and time on Short Lists that I find no reward in reading, I thought Stone would be different after reading several blurbs for his books. I guess there's a reason I had to search for those blurbs and had never heard of Stone: he can't create believable characters (much less likeable ones), he's lazy about his choices advancing his plots, and he wastes words on what might be subplots except that he leaves them unfinished or lazily brought to a close. I think I've got one more of his lying around, but I hold zero hope that it will provide entertainment or enlightenment. Too bad I can't award zero stars--that's the award it deserves.

Steve says

In his eighth novel, novelist Robert Stone revisits familiar ground via similar characters, themes and settings. As with protagonists from earlier novels, Michael Ahearn, a teacher at a small Midwestern college, is a dissatisfied academic—a half-man, compartmentalized and walled off from hope, sliding into alcoholism and infidelity as he enters middle-age. To some extent he has had success in building a fragile, but comfortable world. Both he and his wife Kristin (a Chaucer expert) have their college jobs, a son, a house, and a dog.

Indeed, Ahearn has kept his life in a rough balance, though he does have an eye for the ladies and a taste for whiskey. However, as in all Stone novels, clouds are gathering on the horizon. In the novel's first pages, one senses a growing tension in the Ahearn household. The turn of the wheel begins when Michael and a couple of teacher buddies head out to go deer hunting. The hunting trip has its previously established ritual, with Michael insisting upon stopping at a hole-in-the-wall diner for a special unblended Irish whiskey. This little necessity illustrates clearly how Michael has spent his life encased in empty traditions and conducting tame suburban rituals.

At the diner, Michael safely slums a bit with the locals. Still, there is an edge, a blending of the real and surreal in this nowhere bar. Michael, while chatting up Megan, a young and hard barmaid, feels a faint brush of danger as he is mocked by others at the bar—though it is a brush he apparently enjoys. As Megan turns away to get his whiskey, he notices the forked tongue of a snake tattooed on the nape of her neck. It's a warning and signal of a darker world—its near boundaries. The coming danger is further reinforced by an incident in the woods. As Michael sits in his tree stand, he witnesses another hunter trying to move a deer's carcass through the underbrush with a wheel barrel. It's a grotesque scene, like something out of a Hieronymous Bosch painting, which will later mutate into a more grotesque tableau before the novel's end. To some extent the entire hunting portion of the novel, with all its establishment of fateful symbols and patterns—right down to a dropped flashlight—contains some of the best writing in the book.

A phone call soon shatters the backwoods reverie of the teacher-hunters. Paul, Michael and Kristin's son, nearly dies in an accident. Though the boy lives, the cracks that were in Michael's world suddenly expand. Unlike Kristin, he has no faith to turn to. His has led an entirely superficial existence, right down to his

church attendance, with its reliance on comforting and familiar traditions and rituals, but for him, without the spiritual underpinnings. It is a vague and unanchored need that dominates Michael's world. Additionally, an apparently indifferent God has nearly allowed his son to die. His drinking increases, and the friction with his wife begins to grow to an unbridgeable distance. Finally, enter Lara, a fellow teacher, who is a new and exotic addition to his life.

Lara is a complex figure. She's a femme fatale with killer looks and amoral sexual appetites, who is rumored to have slept with Castro and to have known Graham Greene. She's a shadowy figure with shadowy ties—through family and a previous marriage—to the intelligence community. Right-wing, left-wing, it's an ever-shifting cynical prism—the spy game's "Hall of Mirrors"—that the reader shouldn't even try to penetrate in hopes of understanding. However, Lara can also be fragile, even frantic. At times, this character's complexity breaks down into confusingly mixed signals. Which Lara is real? The fact that she reflects, just as disjointedly, the world and its intrigues perhaps provides an answer, though it leaves the reader with an ever-shifting symbol-of-the-moment more than a flesh and blood character.

Upon meeting Michael, there is a witty, allusive repartee between the two. Lara launches zingers about Michael's Norman Rockwell family, and Michael counters with his Anna Karenina response—and invitation— "Happy families are all alike." At this level, Lara works best. The affair begins and Michael is hardly subtle as he skates closer to the edge with Lara. He drinks more and stays out to all hours of the night, while neglecting the needs and company of his family. A price quickly begins to accrue.

Kristin isn't dumb. Though the accident with Paul now has her immersed in an upscale Bible study, she nevertheless remains suspicious of her husband. Paul is also picking up on changes in Dad and starts to act out. But Michael is in too deep now. There are rough sexual games, guns, and some mean racquetball. However, the recent death of a brother forces Lara to revisit her past, which is on an island near Haiti. This memory triggers Lara's disintegration. It seems her brother, on his island—St. Trinity—had stolen her soul, and she needs to get it back through a vudoun ceremony.

At this point, things are getting pretty cluttered in the novel. Does Stone wish his novel to be a noirish thriller or a black comedy? I suppose there's no reason why both can't be done—Jim Thompson proved that numerous times—but the jarring tone shift that occurs in the novel risks going beyond a narrative surprise. What had started out as an American tale of adultery and other small town darkneses transitions quite suddenly into a Hawthorne-like tale, with an international Goodman Brown moving down a phantasmagoric woodland path filled with monsters, both external and internal. Like the original, Michael has left behind his Faith—what little there was of it. How readers will respond to this shift will vary, no doubt creating camps of those that love Stone's experimentation and those that simply find it incoherent. There will also be those, like myself, who can stake out a middle ground by carefully following the author's thread through the murky night, while at the same time not letting the story become overwhelmed by the shadows.

For Stone's purposes, Lara's home, St. Trinity, is something of a generic "hotspot." Although similar to Compostela from Stone's *Flag for Sunrise*, it lacks that novel's topical link to the troubles of the time. There are rumors of rebels, the CIA, Special Ops, Columbian drug runners—all roaming the countryside and armed to the teeth. In the hills, voudon drums constantly beat out the island's troubling heartbeat. The place is quickly going to hell in a handbasket. Somehow, knowledge of this rapidly growing, but seemingly remote, danger reaches Michael while stateside, as both he and Lara schedule to meet—and to dive—during the Easter break. He is also there to lend support to the suddenly weak Lara, who is frantic over her lost soul. The cast of characters is ludicrous and for the most part evil. Even the more neutral ones are over the top. For example, Liz McKie, a reporter, and probable CIA informant, has a manic, in-your-face air about her. She's

like Dennis Hopper whooping it up over Kurtz while still insisting she's trying to do a job. Basically, like Michael, she digs the action and the danger. She is also not to be trusted.

Michael lands in this mess and undergoes something of a transformation. Gone is the drunk, lets-have-fun guy, and now comes the hero. A plane—seeking to get out before the balloon goes up—goes down in the bay with some valuable goods, which angers the resident Columbian drug lords. The connection between Lara's brother and the drug lords is only hinted at, leaving the reader to make guesses in the dark. Michael is dragooned—for love's sake, not to mention Lara's life, to make a night-time dive for the goods. This is another very effective and well-written section. Though different, it also recalls a similar scene from Stone's earlier *Flag for Sunrise*. Both Holliwell from *Flag for Sunrise* and Ahearn in *Bay of Souls* find themselves making an actual but also metaphysical descent into the unknown.

If *Bay of Souls* is about anything, it's about descent. Michael's chance, his opportunity, is only partially grasped. In the end, he plays Judas to both himself and Lara. When Lara earlier asks Ahearn whether he is with her—in the ranks of death,—he must ultimately answer "No"—not that far, baby. Lara, despite her jetsetting hipness, is indeed quite true in her passions. She does love Michael. In the end, it's Michael that hedges (before the cock crows?), though one can hardly blame him as he runs through a demon-filled night, dodging fire-drenched necklacing parties and dancing with a cigar-smoking vudoun witch. Transcendence has its price, and its price is harrowing.

What waits for him at home is not only diminished, it is gone. Kristin has found his hunting friend—and probable local CIA recruiter—to be more attuned to the dull life, while Michael's son is distant and disturbed. Even Megan the barmaid is changed, but in a way that suggests she has found her own walk on the wild side right in the U.S.A. *Bay of Souls* is not Stone's best work. It is largely a return to areas previously mined—and mined better—in earlier novels. Still, *Bay of Souls* is a good novel and worth a careful reading. (3 1/2 stars, which I'm rounding up.) Stone, as always, is the serious craftsman dealing with serious themes. It is a disturbing novel, filled with haunting images that resonate both in meaning and vividness long after the book is finished. Stone's nightmarish island in the sun will stand as that author's own small heart of darkness.

Margaret Carmel says

While this book had some gems, overall this was a disappointing book.

Bay of Souls is about Michael Ahearn, a dissatisfied academic from the midwest who is struggling with his family life and is in general unhappy. After his son almost dies from exposure in an incident that is not explained in the slightest, he grows even more distant from his family and eventually begins an affair with the mysterious Lara Purcell.

Just as the cliches would lead you to believe, Michael and Lara begin a tumultuous affair that livens up his life. Lara then tells him that she needs to return to the (fictional) Caribbean island where she grew up to participate in a voodoo ceremony to retrieve her soul. While there, she and Michael get caught up in a web of intrigue related to third world corruption and the drug trade.

In the beginning, this book suffers from following a well worn path of a man having a midlife crisis. Then about halfway through Stone just adds EVERY SINGLE INSANE THING HE CAN THINK OF to make this *not cliché*. Events just didn't make sense and none of the characters except for Michael were well formed.

A big problem I had with this book is how Stone uses the stereotype of the third world country left in ruins as the backdrop for the second half of the novel, but none of it was terribly fleshed out. He wanted you to buy into every single assumption you've ever had about a poor Caribbean island in order to fill in the blanks of his strangely unbelievable story telling.

Also, Lara was white? But believed in voodoo? Everything in this section read heavily of cultural appropriation in order to add to the manic pixie dream girl aesthetic of her character.

Despite these plotting issues, I would read another book of Stone's just because where he got the writing right it was AMAZING. The scene where Michael dove on the wrecked plane held my attention and I felt like I was there and he created an otherworldly amount of suspense. The description of the ill timed hunting trip at the beginning of the book was also incredibly well done, and I liked some of the parallels between the diving scene and the hunting trip.

This was disappointing, but it was worth reading for the dive scene alone.

FrankH says

Stone is up to his old tricks here, with dramatic effect. It's an odd story though...an adulterous Midwestern academic transported to the world of Caribbean voodoo -- or some variation thereof. I personally could not credit the material on spirit worship with the necessary gravitas I believe Stone needs to make this novel work. For avid Stone fans only.

Betty Perkins says

The most enjoyable moment for me was removing the bookmark to end the attempt to read this story. A writer usually weaves some bit of interest into the story to give the reader a reason for turning a page. It became clumsy, jumbled words on a page, many of which I reread to be sure I wasn't distracted and missing the point. I truly enjoy reading books of various genres and envy the talent of authors to be able to commit a story to words. I forced myself to read exactly half of the story before coming to the decision that there was not one reason to continue. Even with the not-so-great books I've read, I still finish them because I want to know how it ends. Not so with this book. My apologies to the main character, the wife, the son and the lover for leaving their stories unfinished for this reader but apathy won a rare victory. I acquired this book in a library used book fundraiser event. Had I paid full price, I would feel worse. As it is, one dollar was overpriced. In fairness I have seen others review this author with positive comments on his other books. I will keep an open mind.

Maniacalshen says

God, I didn't even get very far. I wanted to give up by fifteen pages in. The main character is a whiny jerk, with whom I could not at all sympathize, and no one else was very likable, relatable, or even interesting either. It was just no fun to read.
