

2013

Review of *Island of Bones: Essays* By Joy Castro

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Foster, Patricia, "Review of *Island of Bones: Essays* By Joy Castro" (2013). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2507.
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Island of Bones: Essays. By Joy Castro. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. 132 pp. Notes, bibliography. \$16.95 paper.

With the lyric vision of a poet, the dramatic tension of a novelist, and the meditative commentary of an essayist, Joy Castro has crafted a remarkable book of linked essays about the multiple border crossings of identity. In the book's title essay, "Island of Bones," the narrator ruptures the myths of the mainstream Cuban American narrative (her family immigrated not to Miami after Fidel Castro's revolution but to Key West in the 1870s; worshiped not in Catholic cathedrals but in the Kingdom Halls of the Jehovah's Witnesses; earned money not through investments but as "cleaners of other people's houses, grocery checkers, cops") and resists the exotic "performance" of a gendered ethnic identity often expected of Latinas. After growing up as the adoptive Latina baby to Cuban American parents and doing graduate work in U.S. Latina literature, Castro's own identity is ruptured: at age twenty-six she discovers that she isn't Latina at all. Her birth mother, a midwesterner, is Irish, French, and Swedish. With this revelation, Castro's identity is "severed." The essays that follow reveal how a writer's cultural identity shaped by family, place, trauma, education, and class awareness evokes a literary identity, one that resists stereotypes, that stays true to the "jagged, smashed places of edges and fragments . . . of feeling lost, of perilous freedom."

It is from these jagged, smashed places that the book's beauty and insight emerge. In "Farm Use," the narrator tells the story of a brutal stepfather who sees both mother and daughter as sexual prey, who beats the mother, daughter, and son

for any show of disrespect—even looking him in the eye, who denies them food and clothing and keeps them isolated outside a small West Virginia town. And yet what is heartbreaking isn't just the stepfather's ruthlessness but also the mother's defeat, her supplication to the daughter to help satisfy this man's voracious sexual appetite.

In "An Angle of Vision," Castro narrates the complications of academia, of "fitting in" with a predominantly white middle-class faculty at a private college in the Midwest when her heritage is impoverished and ethnic, where women are "schooled to silence." Though articulate and credentialed with a PhD, the narrator discovers that "jumping class comes at a price," one that includes social anxiety and self-consciousness. To jump class is to become bicultural, to belong neither to the past narrative of poverty and shame nor to the new narrative of middle-class privilege and entitlement.

In *Island of Bones*, Castro seduces the reader by a language that lives in the nerves and by an arc of resilience that suggests how one insightful woman emerges from a bruised life.

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