



More of This World or Maybe Another

By Barb Johnson
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Introduction

More of This World or Maybe Another is a collection of award-winning stories about four outsiders whose unruly lives intersect on the back streets of New Orleans. From the rural Gulf Coast to a rough-and-tumble neighborhood known as Mid-City, the stories in *More of This World or Maybe Another* pulse with an anxious inner life set down in the chaos of the street. Closely linked tales introduce readers to teenaged Delia, who experiences first-love jitters atop an oil storage tank where she tries to work up the nerve to kiss a girl. Dooley's music career takes off when he moves to the city, but some devastating news points to divorce and an impulse buy ends in tragedy. A sensitive alcoholic named Pudge survives his fat-boy childhood with an abusive father and then hides out from his own son, Luis. On the eve of his confirmation, the fatherless Luis drugs his mother's boyfriend. It is a Mid-City laundromat that serves as home base for this cast of powerfully drawn characters who must all unite to save Luis from a violent end. Funny and haunting by turns, Johnson's unforgettable characters are

driven by something fragile and irresistible, a sputtering drive to love and be loved.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think that the title of the short story "More of This World or Maybe Another" was chosen as the title for the collection of stories? What elements found in this story typify the others?
2. ". . . night is rolled out as far as Delia can see. There's a swamp out there, she knows, and the Gulf of Mexico. Beyond that, there could be anything. More of this world or maybe another." In what sense does Delia find another world? In what way does she encounter more of that same world she's living in as a teenager?
3. In "Killer Heart," Dooley says, "You can't really know anyone. You can't even know yourself." Do you agree with Dooley? Which characters in MOTWOMA seem to know themselves and others, and which do not? Why?
4. Imagine each of the characters in a middle class environment. How would their lives be different? How would they be the same? What benefits do the characters get from living in Mid-City that they might not have access to in an affluent neighborhood?
5. "There's real trouble in the world. The kind that can't be fixed. The kind we lie awake keeping vigil against. Love is not trouble. It is all we have to light our days, to bring music to the time we've been given." What examples of real trouble make their way into this collection of short stories? Are there parallels between these specific incidences of trouble and trouble on a more national level? Which kinds of trouble seem to be a product of modern existence and which have always been part of the human experience?
6. Many of the stories depict ad hoc families, families made up of unrelated individuals who support one another financially and physically and emotionally. The neighborhood, in fact, acts as a kind of family for its inhabitants. Which of these relationships surprised you? Do you know "families" like these? Do you think the existence of such families is the product of economic necessity or our shifting notions of family?
7. In the book, we see most of the characters as they were when they were kids and then again as adults: Pudge, Delia, Dooley. Given the sorts of children they were, which of the adult characters surprised you? What sort of adult do you imagine Luis will turn out to be?
8. Given how "St. Luis of Palmyra" ends, what do you imagine will happen the next morning?
9. Which of the characters was your favorite and why? Which do you think is the strongest? The weakest? The most heart-breaking? The most inspiring?
10. In what way does the neighborhood of Mid-City serve as a character in these stories? Are these stories that could only happen in New Orleans or are they the sorts of stories that might unfold in any city?

About the Author

Barb Johnson has been a carpenter in New Orleans for more than twenty years. In 2008 she received her MFA from the University of New Orleans. While there, she won a grant from the Astraea Foundation, *Glimmer Train's* Short Story Award for New Writers, and *Washington Square's* short story competition. She is the fifth recipient of AROHO's 2009 \$50,000 Gift of Freedom. This is her first collection.