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Lost in Austin — Life on the Water

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As some of you may recall, I enjoy reading publishers' catalogs and making notes about what appeals to me and why. I have also on occasion written about books that I like but without publisher and price information, things that one finds in a formal review. What follows is a book review but written as much for myself as for potential purchasers and readers of the book.

A disclaimer — the author, **Ronnie Stone**, is a first cousin. I first read the book in typescript and found it hard to put down. When I wrote the review, I tried to separate what appealed to me as a relative finding familiar names sprinkled throughout the book with what appealed to me as a reader, someone who enjoys seafaring tales (**W.W. Jacobs**, **William McFee**, **Joseph Conrad**, and **Patrick O'Brian**, to name my favorites) and collects **Hornblower** novels and related items.

You'll have to read on to see what I thought of the book. As I read it, I was reminded, favorably, of two other books about life on the water, *Two Years Before the Mast*, by **Richard Henry Dana, Jr.** and *The African Queen* by **C.S. Forester** of **Admiral Hornblower** fame, the former for its depiction of the rhythms of life at sea and on shore and the latter for the romance tested and strengthened by the perils of life aboard a boat on the water, whether it be a river in Africa or the Intercoastal Waterway (<http://www.cruisingtheicw.com/>). I hope that you buy the book. It is suitable for women's studies collections and local collections along the southeastern coast of the U. S. from North Carolina down to Florida and on to the Bahamas. And if you do read it, you should know that **Ronnie** is already working on a sequel.

A Year in the Sun, by **Ramona S. Stone**, Gilroy, CA: **Bookstand Publishing**, 2008. ISBN 978-1-58909-506-9, pbk. \$18.95.

"How can a mother explain that blight which settles over her life at the loss of a child, even an adult child? It is not the natural order of things to outlive our offspring. The world goes askew. Life becomes a thing deformed; its mold twisted. Faith forsakes us, hiding in a morass of unfamiliar feelings; we are left without our leaning posts, torn by silent screams, unuttered and unutterable."

But this powerful statement is misleading because the author does not dwell on the tragedy of her life nor does she indulge in self-pity or sermonizing.

Instead, the reader is invited to go on a voyage down the Inter Coastal Waterway (ICW) and visit the ports of call along the way in the Carolinas (including Charleston), Georgia, Florida, and the Bahamas.

As difficult as it is to accept, personal trials and sorrows are as much a part of life as the triumphs and joys, albeit harder to deal with and impossible to forget. This lesson is woven into the fabric of the tale, a sea-faring tale of love and adventure with crisp, clear black and white photographs to put faces and places to names.

Life at sea, even when not on the high seas, is a life of rhythms and opposites, of pleasures and dangers, of repose and high alert. For every tranquil sunset there seems to be a dark horizon. Each afternoon of snorkeling in the sun is paid for with a midnight squall that challenges one's seamanship, strength and courage. What better way to learn about one's shipmate and one's self?

My earliest and only experience with a conch was with the shell that propped open a door in my grandma's house. It was with that conch shell that I heard my first roar of the ocean, or the first roar that I can remember because I was born in Wilmington, North Carolina during the War (The War is WWII) and the sounds of the beach include what the conch shell can only and poorly imitate.

But conch fritters? Conch burgers? How to skin a conch? After reading this book, I am curious with a strange hunger even after the conch is described as a large snail that slimes the person lucky enough to try to skin it for the first time.

But conch is a treat and not like cheese.

"Cheese was a staple of most cruisers [boats], easily adding food value to main dishes and providing quick and healthy snacks. Washed in vinegar and wrapped in cheesecloth, it had a longer shelf life than other dairy products, another plus in our list of stores."

But I digress. Let's go back to my grandmother's conch shell, probably collected during one of her annual visits to Florida to see my late **Uncle Wilburn**. To me, a seashell is a seashell, some larger or smaller but otherwise interchangeable. Sand dollars and star fish were different, of course. But a seashell is not just a seashell just as a conch shell is not just a conch shell.

"**Dick** backtracked to where the large shell lay. Heavily encrusted with calcium deposits, it was difficult to identify, a grimy-looking thing but with the flat crown and heavily dentate lip identifying it." Yes, it was a helmet conch, aptly described in a book about shell identification.

The author has an eye for the beautiful, be it the flora and fauna, or for those events that test one's nerve. Here are my favorite examples of each.

"We settled in early, ready for a restful night. But soon after dark the boat began to pitch and roll in a confusion of currents.

"It'll get better," we said to each other. The words were becoming our mantra. But the movement continued and intensified as the night wore on. Hour after hour the heaving waters tossed us about. Every pot and pan began to clang and rattle; jars struck together, threatening to break; and cans in the food lockers rumbled back and forth."

An alternating rhythm goes as follows:

"In cool morning air we went ashore for a final visit [to Spanish Wells] before returning to Royal Harbor. As we climbed steps to the top of the seawall, I thought again how like Easter eggs the small cottages were. Their bright blue, yellow and tan, faded orange, pink and purple stood out against the green foliage. Poinciana bloomed like bright umbrellas. Lime, lemon, and banana trees grew in yards alongside coconut palms, crape myrtle, and hibiscus. Conch shells lined walkways and garden plots where sweet potato and watermelon vines covered the ground. Breadfruit weighed the branches of trees, drooping over small fenced lawns. The island was an artist's palette of color, an unbroken feast for the eyes. Stacked here and there against the houses and under the trees were lobster pots, waiting for the season to begin."

If ever the tranquil life exists, it is here in this paragraph that, of anything else in the book, makes me want to be there. Perhaps it's because I don't yearn for danger or hard work or fighting the elements, but that description puts me in a hammock with a cold rum drink in one hand and a good book in the other, a good book like *A Year in the Sun*. 🌴

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2009 Conference	4 November	5-7 November
2010 Conference	3 November	4-6 November
2011 Conference	2 November	3-5 November