

Super America: Stories

Anne Panning.

Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Soliday

In *Super America*, an award-winning collection of ten short stories and one novella, Anne Panning takes us inside the lives of everyday people across the continental and pacific United States. In her stories, we meet characters struggling to cope with unexpected events, some of which readers might see as touching or poignant, others we might judge dramatic and painful. Through her ability to build tension quickly, write clear and believable dialogue, and create evocative moods that linger in the reader's imagination, Panning unveils the hidden meaning of events, both ordinary and extraordinary.

In "Five reasons I miss the laundromat," the narrator folds her family's clothing in the spacious laundry room of her home; as she recalls her younger self, the reader can almost inhale the warmth of the fresh laundry she remembers removing from a coin-operated dryer. In "Tidal Wave Wedding," we join a newlywed couple on a Hawaiian beach as they search for a lost wedding ring. While we feel the poignancy of their desperate and fruitless search, we also sense the couple's awe in the face of unstoppable tsunami waves, which they view from atop a mountain.

Panning builds dramatic tension quickly and believably. In a few pages, she introduces provocative, realistic conflicts. In "Super America" and "Hillbilies," her characters struggle with the unavoidable, unsolvable consequences of seeking and/or achieving higher social status; in "Cravings," forbidden love takes a contemporary form; the struggles in "What happened" and "Freeze" are overtly dramatic and intense, involving death and disability. Of her characters' trials, both big and small, one narrator concedes, "Life more often than not throws you where it wants to" (85).

At times, I found myself hoping for tidier endings, for Panning to conclude each story like a cut of meat wrapped neatly in butcher paper and tied with string. Though she eschews closure, her clever conclusions provide unique pleasures. And if we take this assertion to heart, "For you, this is where the story ends.... You can go back to your own lives—read and dream, eat and sleep" (94), Panning means to show us that even if we were to presume a story *could* end, its essence will linger somewhere outside ourselves.