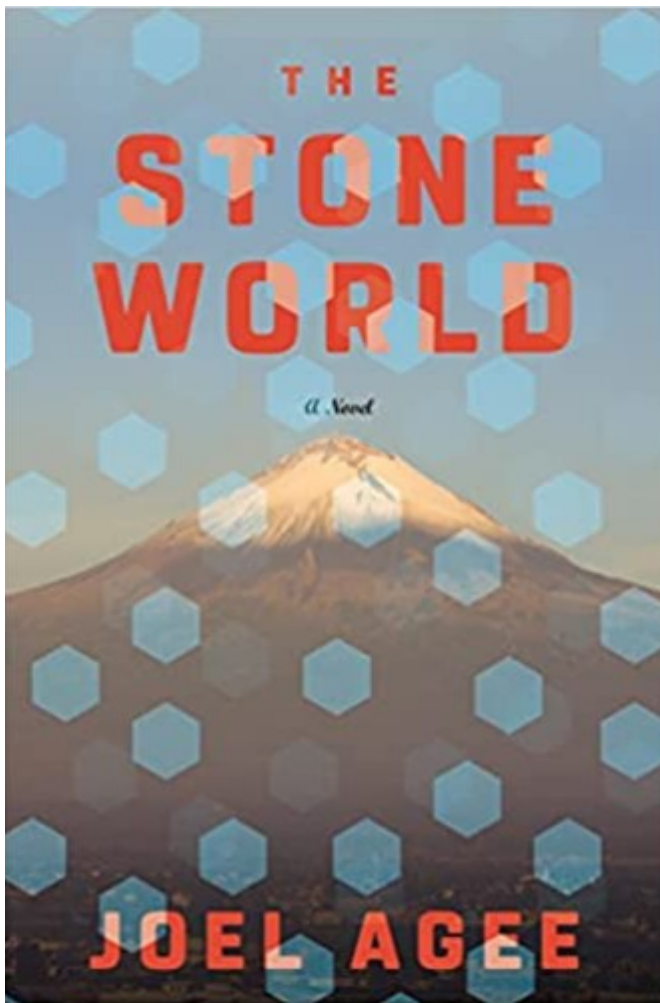


Joel Agee's novel of childhood wonder and terror

Fantastical things surround six-year-olds everywhere.

by [Joshua B. Grace](#) in the [June 29, 2022](#) issue

In Review



The Stone World

By Joel Agee

Melville House

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When I was around six years old, I could fly. Well, it wasn't so much that I could fly as that I could hover and slowly float around a room. I remember hovering in the air over the couch my parents had against the back wall of our living room, and I remember hovering over the construction toys and model trains in my grandparents' basement. I never told the grown-ups, perhaps because I wanted to enjoy my short, hovering, childhood flights in privacy.

I don't share this to brag; I share it because Joel Agee's newest novel returned this childhood memory to mind. The main character in *The Stone World* is Peter, a six-year-old boy who can, at times, lie down on the ground and sink into it. When he sinks into it, he can hear the stones. He senses frightful presences. He finds King Arthur's Excalibur.

Despite the wonderful novelty of Peter's ability to sink into the ground, half-suspended in the world above and half exploring the world below, *The Stone World* isn't so much about fantastical things that are hard for grown-ups to believe as it is about the fantastical things that surround six-year-olds everywhere. Agee's novel is a work of wonder.

There are significant events in *The Stone World*, but much of the book's magic lies in how it balances the significance of these events. After all, this is Peter's story. The novel is set in Mexico after World War II. Peter's parents are expatriates and communist sympathizers. Theirs is a world of privilege amid poverty and racism. However, these are things that stay largely at the margins of Peter's world. He questions them and reacts to them at times, but the arrests of his parents' friends are things that grown-ups talk about when he's not there.

Instead, we see Peter's heart swell with the creation of his first poem. We recall our childhood curiosity as he shocks himself by placing his tongue on the bar in his window that carries a small electrical current. He pushes past the initial pain to explore the strangeness of the sensation. And we grieve with Peter when he tricks his best friend into placing his tongue on the bar, only for his friend to react to the shock by ending their friendship.

There is nothing extraordinary about most of Peter's relationships and discoveries, save the beautiful and vivid language with which Agee traces their unfolding. There's a sense that anything can happen, such as when Peter, who goes by "Pira," apologizes to his friend:

“I’m sorry I hurt you. I’m your friend.”

Arón halted with his back to Pira. He was holding the brightly colored feather duster, staring at the feet of the crucified man. Then he turned around and with tearful rage, staring into his friend’s eyes shouted—never before had Pira heard Arón shout:

“Go away! I’m telling you, go away!”

And Pira went home.

It is through moments such as this that we see Peter grapple with such concepts as friendship, betrayal, loss, grief, beauty, secrets, privacy, racism, respect, life, and death.

Through Peter’s eyes, we see the mixture of innocence and brutality as three boys play with magnifying glasses, focusing beams of light onto an anthill to fry the unsuspecting ants. We feel Peter’s young joy and adventure as he and his mother sneak their maid, Zita, into a hotel pool that doesn’t allow Indigenous people. Peter is as amused by pretending that Zita is his *niñera*—his nanny—as he is disappointed and confused by the idea that Zita wouldn’t be welcome. We stand alongside Peter’s awe as he watches a committee of vultures rip the flesh off a dead bull, then travel carefully down a steep trail to observe the dead body up close.

The Stone World vaguely follows the course of a summer leading to Peter’s departure from Mexico. But the true beauty of Agee’s story relies very little on the larger course of events. Instead, Agee infuses each new moment with a childlike wonder, one that seems utterly genuine. Peter revels in the things he learns that make him feel more grown-up, even as he feels apart from the matters that more fully concern his parents and their friends.

As Agee followed Peter’s exploration and growth, I kept thinking about my six-year-old son. I thought about how he could be so cruel at one moment and so deeply sweet and loving in the next. How he makes friends simply by talking to a new boy for 15 minutes at the playground. A gulf of maturity and experience divides us, and I typically guide and direct him based on what I see from my side of that chasm. Yet, as I read *The Stone World*, I felt at times that I was being too short with my son and discounting his experiences too lightly.

The Stone World does not suggest that we aim to be six years old again or that children are more mature than adults, but it reminds us that our world is far larger and deeper than we tend to experience it at any given moment. The world that we see is not as solid as it appears. Instead, if we listen closely and allow it, we can sink into it and rediscover its many unseen threats, beauties, and wonders.