

BOOK REVIEW

The Fancy Dancer, by Patricia Nell Warren

Gay fiction with a positive attitude and literary merit as well may be one of the strongest and most enduring aspects of the current liberation movement. Author, Patricia Nell Warren, who seems to be following the path of Mary Renault in establishing herself as a novelist of the "new liberation," scores 100 per cent on positive attitude and possibly a lower figure on the side of literary merit. She weakens her case somewhat (especially for her straight readers) through lack of credibility and the inability to develop her characters as wholes rather than as symbolic "aspects" of the gay scene.

The Front Runner (1974), in spite of its appealing pathos and accepting attitude toward the more bizarre stereotypes of the gay counter culture, had the credibility of a fairy tale (pun intended). The utopian atmosphere of a small, anti-establishment (though apparently well-endowed by private interests) college in the rural Northeast proved too much nonreality for the neophyte author to resist. Billy Sive's father and his drag queen lover, the first passionate embraces in a gay porno theater in Des Moines is questionable in itself), the back-yard Christian cum Bhuddist wedding, and the denouement that gets Billy Sive's progeny into the picture are aspects that might work separately, but not thrown in to the common kettle of stew. While the main characters are clearly drawn, there are many others (Delphine, Jacques, et al.) either thrown in to represent stereotypes or given personal situations which arouse interest but are largely left hanging.

These criticisms are in a very large measure negated, at least partially, in the The Fancy Dancer (1976). Though the situation itself (a clandestine relationship between a Roman priest and a drifting half-breed) may raise credibility-conscious eyebrows, the progress of the story and its outcome will seem closer to home for most gay people and less fantastic for straight readers. While no less positive about the gay issue in general, the main characters in the later novel are sometimes unhappy because of their own apprehensions and fears as well as the oppression of the world around them. The reader is forced to accept the protagonists' ugliness as well as their beauty, and the supporting cast is smaller in number and more honestly and fully drawn.

Unlike The Front Runner, The Fancy Dancer does not need a catastrophic tragedy like a murder to offset the unremitting sappiness and emphatic foreshadowings which characterized the former. Its outcome is more uplifting, because one feels that its story could really happen. In terms of its contribution to the cause of liberation, there is a hopeful feeling when a novel that is closer to the truth will be more highly esteemed on artistic grounds as well.