

A Dance in Paradise

Lee Chavis

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In Lee Chavis' debut novel, *A Dance in Paradise*, life is anything but a heavenly frolic for the ironically-named Sam Powerhouse. It is 1979 and Sam is an accomplished young law student and violinist with an undergraduate degree in philosophy. But after the death of his grandfather, he spirals out of control. Circumstances seem to conspire against him whenever things turn for the better. Unable to find respite, Sam drifts from town to town, job to job, and woman to woman.

Sam is a round character, and readers will empathize with him—to a point. Eventually, he devolves into a racist, foul-mouthed drunk. The F-word and drinking gets more frequent as the novel goes on. The protagonist thinks snidely of a black cop that he represents his affirmative action dollars at work. After he lands a job as a teacher, he frequently thinks about hitting or swearing at his black students. This racism shocks because it first appears so late in the novel.

The black student characters are inattentive and have ridiculous names, like Allterrain. The lone blond, blue-eyed student in Sam's class is the teacher's pet. Stereotypically, the other teachers bemoan the unruliness of Sam's black students, and the white boy's father calls the mostly-black school a "zoo." Sam inspires his black students to love learning—like so many clichéd films about white teachers encouraging students of color.

Sam's kindly aunt and his late grandfather are multifaceted characters who evoke sympathy, but they appear so little that their presence barely registers. The lack of focus on Sam's relationships with these family members is unfortunate, because the story of a grief-stricken man whose family tries to reach out would make for a compelling plot. Instead, Sam is saddled with a father who committed suicide, a mentally ill mother whose bipolar disorder is laughably depicted, and a caring but largely absent younger sister. In addition, Sam encounters women who exist only as blandly beautiful sex partners.

The novel spends a great deal of time building Sam up, only to beat him down time and time again. No matter what the character does, he has no control over anything. Calamity plagues him despite his best intentions. The novel seems to try to make a point about fate, free will, or luck, but it is unclear what the message is. Readers will not find paradise in this story of needless suffering.

JILL ALLEN (July 15, 2010)

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