



Clarion Review

General

Dancing Backward in Paradise

Vera Jane Cook

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Five Stars (out of Five)

Dancing Backward in Paradise by Vera Jane Cook is a charming rags-to-riches story with a heartwarming ending, memorable characters, and a riveting plot that will make the reader forget the outside world.

It's 1967. The world is rapidly changing, but eighteen-year-old Grace remains oblivious to anything outside her own small circle of existence. After all, Paradise is more than just the name of a trailer park; it's home, and it's all Grace thinks she'll ever need. However, Mama is convinced that Grace could make it big in New York City as an actress, since "being pretty made life as easy as picking day lilies." Reluctant to leave her fiancé, Lenny Bean, Grace finds all sorts of excuses to delay her trip. She's unaware that Lenny has gotten engaged to another woman with the intent to murder her, inherit her estate, and then marry Grace. Once she figures out his scheme, however, leaving for New York is the easy part. Reporting a potential murder turns out to be nearly impossible.

The characters in this story are rich and deep. At first, the reader might roll her eyes at Grace's naïveté and childish reactions as she falls for Lenny, a sexy but lazy "cowboy with sideburns." Yet as Grace experiences the outside world in sophisticated New York, a place "so miraculous and exciting, so painfully alienating that you just might find yourself amongst the confusion," the reader will appreciate Grace's ability to stretch and change. Minor characters have layers, too. For example, Ezra Buckley Bean, Lenny's father and a gallant southern gentleman, speaks in colorful Shakespearean language that doesn't seem to belong in a trailer park. There's also Mama, whose gentle words of wisdom steer Grace toward enlightenment. Her observations on New York City are priceless; when Grace marvels at all the skyscrapers, Mama replies, "That's what New York City is, honey—many heartbeats, many visions."

The author's craftsmanship is stunning and poetic. Cook draws on her own southern

heritage to create masterful metaphors like “The car smelled like a Budweiser plant had exploded under the hood and those fools were the happy fish floating in the foam,” or “I was melting faster than ice cubes in Mama’s bourbon.” In the hands of an amateur, such comparisons would only equate one thing to another; Cook layers her metaphors to establish setting and deepen character development.

This story is not for everyone. Sex permeates Grace’s life—whether it’s her perverted grandfather chasing her around the bedroom to no avail, her brother messing around with “every woman in town under forty,” or her own boyfriend cheating on her for money. Yet each sexual encounter—whether it’s that of Grace or one of her friends—teaches her new lessons that ultimately allow her to create her own path in life.

Although a younger audience may not be familiar with the author’s references to Loretta Young, Merle Haggard, or Hayley Mills, they will surely relate to Grace’s difficulties as she tries to figure out what to do with her life. For older readers, invoking celebrities of the time will resurrect memories of 1967. Anyone who enjoys Southern stories, coming-of-age adventures, murder thrillers, or a satisfying romantic tale should read *Dancing Backward in Paradise*.

Emily Asad