Clarion Review

General

Down By the Riverbank
Sonia I. Vazquez
978-1-4343-2606-5
Four Stars (out of Five)

Seventeen-year-old Michelle Guzman suffers egregious abuse from her stepparents and older stepbrother; conditioned to accept that she deserves it she's sliding into apathy. Her stepmother's program of systematic starvation has Michelle's weight down to ninety pounds and frequent bruising and bleeding cuts activate the radar of school officials. Chronic sleep shortages cause such trouble concentrating that Michelle writes anguished poems in the place of answers to essay tests. One of them contains a misfiring metaphor of insidious snakes disguised as a herd of sheep.

A window of hope opens when her guardians rush to Puerto Rico upon receiving news of an approaching death leaving only the sadistic stepbrother to outmaneuver for three weeks. Walking home from school Michelle meets a group of tough young women headed by an assertive charmer called "Sly." Here finally are a few sympathetic people she can open up to about the horrors which have happened since her loving father died six years before. When asked about orientation Michelle answers that she isn't attracted to women she only wants reliable friends. Sly responds that one of their associates Liz is also hetero—that isn't a deal-breaker for basic hangin' out.

The Bronx of this novel is rife with pitiless violence from family friends and strangers. Street fights are part of the reality and disagreements result in gunfire. Michelle bursts through her front door under continuous threat of assault: "Around the housing projects you knew to enter and lock yourself into your apartment quickly unless you wanted to get pushed in robbed raped or killed."

The lesson seems to be get the hell out of there or expect to be a victim but the author has professionally committed herself to that borough's children first as a foster system caseworker and then as an elementary teacher. Vazquez makes her stand today in the same place she grew up.

A note to straight folks with little familiarity the lesbian community: most aspects of romance are pretty parallel from flirtation to attachment. Strategic use of Marvin Gaye tunes to advance a seduction is still everyone's surest tactic. Descriptions of these encounters are neither gratuitous nor artificially curbed; Vazquez gets across the universal sensory experiences of apprehension and recognition. Sex functions as a bond-builder and another means of expressing loyalty and acceptance qualities in short supply. The friendships made are the lifesaving kind which demand mutual aid against hostile rivals or anything else too overwhelming.

Down by the Riverbank is a hard-nosed Bronx tale of evolving identity and contrasting urban grit and interior softness. If anything about it draws critical attention it's a structural irregularity. This sort of coming of age struggle is typically capped off by triumph over adversity but there's no law forcing a finish on an upswing. Adversity has a perfectly respectable lifetime win record.

Todd Mercer