



Dragons and Garden Peas

Burt Jacoby

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Neither lung cancer nor fatal boating accident nor the gloom of a homicide investigation will prevent Max the architect from completing his self-appointed mission: to build his dream home on exclusive Shelter Island. He strides over the New York City metropolitan area like a Colossus mowing down recalcitrant “greenies” and obstreperous bird-hugging neighbors and still manages to squeeze in sailing trips with his estranged wife and Thai boxing matches with his girl-on-the-side. After all Max has already conquered alcohol addiction a heart attack divorce and City Hall.

A lesser man would be daunted by all this drama but Max is of the Dirk Pitt mold. Between rounds of thoracic surgery Max focuses on his house project and reconnects with his estranged wife Jessica by sailing with her to Cape Cod. Unfortunately Max wakes up after Jessica’s turn at the helm to find that she has gone overboard. He spends the rest of the novel fending off a homicide investigation.

Our superhero is brash and not given to introspection. He is saved from being irritatingly unbearable by getting himself into a passel of trouble such as when he combatively argues with the Coast Guard about how to search for his missing wife. One would think a highly trained rescue crew with all the latest equipment might win against a middle-aged cancer patient in shock and on serious pain meds but Max is used to getting what he wants all the time.

Jacoby’s descriptions are often very witty and his sharply observed scenes about cancer surgery and the labor of recovery are absorbing. While they might make the reader wince they are vivid and memorable with a bit of gallows humor thrown in. Regrettably Jacoby employs the same type of clinical description in his bedroom scenes which takes away some of the eroticism.

Max is not a terribly deep character but Jacoby provides a handful of entertaining minor characters. His two lawyers motormouth Leonard and intense Linda have all the best lines in the book. Max’s sunny but edgy daughter Lisa is engaging and nails her dad with an assessment of his lover after hearing her voice on his answering machine: “Someone named Renee calls every day. Sounds sexy and a little desperate.”

Dragons and Garden Peas is an effective blend of several genres. There is the fascinating peek into high-powered real estate development in an ultra-expensive market; lovely sailing passages; and plenty of courtroom excitement. The action-packed plot and Max’s flirtations with much younger women will appeal more to a male readership but there are enough interesting scenes and witty dialogue to attract a wider audience.

Jacoby’s ending is too hurried though and it is full of symbolism whose meaning is unclear. A couple of other things may puzzle readers: refrigerators are referred to as “reefers” a term from transportation jargon rather than the more common slang for marijuana. Additionally the author waits until two-thirds of way through the book to divulge the meaning of the book title when he could have explained in an earlier chapter.

Despite the flaws above Jacoby’s second book is an interesting and literate look at how Manhattan developers outmaneuver their opponents race their boats and romance their women. Though Max may be annoyingly self-confident he is never boring and his story makes for amusing reading.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (January 22, 2009)

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