

Dream Magus of Babylon

Dwight S. Huggins

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Having penned her memoirs the title character in the film *Auntie Mame* is aghast over the rewrites her muse has made. “On a bleak January morning” she reads aloud “I came forth like an echo from the hills of Cochemara whilst Diedre wept cruel tears.” Turning to said muse Mame plaintively asks “Wouldn’t it be simpler to say ‘On the day I was born it rained?’ “ This scene often came to mind reading Huggins’ fractured repetitive memoir with his insistence upon using words like “palimpsest” (in singular plural and possessive forms) and “proboscis” (when “nose” would doubtless do).

Yet perhaps it’s facile to read Huggins’ 565 pages and only select passages written grandiosely. As he lovingly recounts his relationship with Stephen S. Katz a theatre practitioner who died of AIDS in 1989 there are also passages of such untrammelled prurience as to give writers of gay erotica a major run in their stockings. What prevents the book from seeming highfalutin on the one hand and engorged with sweaty gay sex scenes on the other is that Huggins is apparently an extremely prodigious dreamer with unbelievable powers of recall. There are scores of pages in which Huggins retells his dreams in almost exasperating detail: If we believe half of what he says happened in his dreams he’s led a fuller life spiritually than most of us could hope for.

Dream Magus really is several books in one. For example Huggins also returns to his roots: Born on the Caribbean island of Nevis St. Kitts where the story of his youth is told—and foretold it seems in dreams. Huggins also immerses readers in Katz’s world of theatrical projects as well as the world of New York City in the late 1980s when the AIDS plague was perceived more as a national epidemic eviscerating the gay community than a global threat to civilization. Scores of individuals some more fleeting than others make appearances and fade as wispy as the subconscious landscape that often interrupts the forward movement of the book rather than illuminates it.

The ultimate word on Huggins’ propensity for grandiloquence is that it occasionally does work such as the moment when he’s striving for solace over the loss of a man he unquestionably loved and to whom he remains devoted. He isn’t the first writer to assert an otherworldly quality to his love to demand that it be characterized without a dip into the waters of the blithe and banal. When he reaches for higher planes in such spirit his prose can be lovely. When used for everything the air seems painfully thin.

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