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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

Himba Pond Dance

Dave Gioia
CreateSpace (Aug 28, 2013)
Softcover $19.95 (478pp)
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Dave Gioia dives into the inner thoughts of teenagers to find interesting insights into burgeoning sexuality.

Dave Gioia's provocative second novel, *Himba Pond Dance*, follows naturally on the heels of his debut, *Valley of Saint Anne*. In both books, Gioia considers mature themes in a frank voice and focuses on the thoughts and feelings of young teenagers exploring their sexuality. *Himba Pond Dance* attempts to extend its reach further into the adult world as it follows a series of couples struggling to make it in America's new economy while also enjoying intense romantic interludes.

At the novel's center are Trey and Kim Hollinswood, teenagers who have been homeless and now share a room—and a lot more—at the home of their mother's boyfriend, Walt. Gioia hides nothing when it comes to describing their sexual experimentation. Depending on the reader's perspective, these scenes—told clearly and authentically, in plain language, through Trey's inner thoughts—may seem bold or inappropriate. While they do capture the intensity of teenage sexuality, many scenes also explore taboo topics that may make some readers uncomfortable.

Gioia's treatment of Kim's burgeoning sexuality is more subtle than his treatment of Trey's. As Kim and her new friend, Cyd, try to figure out where they stand with each other—might their interest in each other mean they're lesbians?—Gioia balances questioning and discovery and tells their story with a convincing modern teenage vibe that includes text messages and Facebook bullying. The girls' dialogue is at once casual and fraught with importance, and Gioia admirably illustrates the way real teenagers attempt to downplay their own curiosities and concerns with attempts to appear cool, calm, and collected.

From flirtatious introductions to intimate connections, relationships soon begin to feel predictable, with shallow dialogue and expected seductions. While there are common threads tying the couples' stories together, momentum flags as the narrative moves from one subplot to another. The serial nature of the stories prevents the novel from coalescing into a cohesive tale with a clear beginning and end.

For the adults in Gioia's story, he sustains, even intensifies, the sexual detail, but doesn't offer as much insight into their feelings. Loosely gathered around the issues of the modern age, particularly the disappearance of the American Dream, the adults come and go from a Brooks Brothers store, which stands as a sort of last bastion of elegance in a world moving toward unemployment and homelessness. This intriguing theme brings currency to the narrative, but it remains relatively undeveloped.

The book comes across more as a collection of related stories than as an extended family drama. It's important to note as well that the sex scenes provide adult entertainment, which may not be clear from the beautiful but potentially misleading cover, which features teenage girls in a forest, dancing in the mists. Readers could easily mistake this for a young-adult novel if they judged by the cover alone.

Readers uncomfortable with tell-it-like-it-is descriptions may be challenged to stick with the story. For the right audience, though, *Himba Pond Dance* offers a refreshingly honest look at relationships and some surprising insights into the teenage mind.

SHEILA M. TRASK (December 12, 2013)

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