

Nothing to Declare

Richard M. Ravin

16 doors press (Feb 2, 2021)

Softcover \$15.99 (224pp)

978-0-578-72297-9

In Richard M. Ravin's novel *Nothing to Declare*, the bonds and boundaries of a friendship are tested by the swirling counterculture of the 1970s.

When Jesse and Marty met in college, Jesse was an amiable, malleable art student; Marty was a wild hippie dropout who was never short of illegal schemes, and who intrigued everyone he met. He was the guy who got the girls—including the girls Jesse was interested in. An uncomfortable love triangle resulted.

Twenty years later, Jesse is summoned to collect Marty's remains, though he hasn't seen his friend in years. The mysterious request, coupled with the dark pull of Marty's charisma, leads Jesse to recall the psychedelic seventies. His are a tangle of uncomfortable memories; he sorts through all that Marty left behind, leading up to a final reckoning with Marty's request. He works to lay old memories to rest and develop renewed appreciation for who he's become.

Here, characters are enlivened and defined by single acts, as when Jesse helps a pretty protestor who's distributing fliers, and she asks whether "a middle-class kid like him should be taking a job that could belong to a member of the working class." When Marty narrates, his thoughts come in fast, strobe-light bursts, and his observations are exuberant about the freedoms available to him. Both he and Jesse are prone to imaginative language, as when merengue music is characterized as having "a rhythm section like a howling jungle." Some of their leaps are abrupt, but they are always worth following.

Nothing to Declare is a rewarding novel that evokes and illuminates the grime and glory of the 1970s.

SUSAN WAGGONER (March / April 2021)

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