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Onyx

Felice Picano
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The author's clever plots lend themselves to unique twists, as in The Lure, Parallel Lives, and Looking

Glass Lives. The plot of Onyx, set in the early 1990s, is deceptively clean: two long-time male lovers are coming to the end of their relationship. Jesse Moody is dying of AIDS, while his partner Ray Henriques is miraculously HIV negative. As a result, Ray is forced to examine the meaning and fulfillment of his life—both with Jesse and, later, without him. Knowing that Ray will soon be alone, Jesse encourages him to find someone else, even before he passes on.

For a while, all is as well as can be expected. Ray does just as Jesse suggests by carrying on a lusty relationship with a straight, married-with-children younger man, and afterward, Ray faithfully relates the details of his new relationship to the all-approving Jesse.

Picano presents the reality of this complicated relationship with authority and disturbing detail, from the opportunistic diseases that strike AIDS victims, to the characteristic appearance of sufferers: "The body… seemed lighter every day, as if the shell remained perfect, but as Jesse slept, night by night, the stuffing seeped out." The author never allows Jesse to get angry at the hand he has been dealt. Instead, he is the stronger of the two and, even near death, Jesse wants to makes his transition an easy one for Ray: "…it would be, at the very least, unaesthetic to loiter on," Jesse thinks, "to be marred by an unsightly trailing-off."

In the end, however, the surviving Ray suffers far more than either of them could have imagined, as several of those around him are struck by AIDS, cancer, and even accident—all within a short span of time. It is "as though Death were a big black shadow of a beast… circling around him, coming closer and closer, snarling, growling… snapping at anyone who got too close to him. But not him. Not him."

Picano is the author of at least 18 books, has been nominated for several Lambda Literary Awards, and is the winner of the Ferro-Grumley Award for fiction. (June)

Ronald L. Donaghe

RONALD L. DONAGHE (June 15, 2001)

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