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The Bearded Lady

Sharlee Dieguez
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In a back-cover paragraph on Dieguez's background, readers learn that the first-time novelist does not share her heroine's hirsute propensity.

But Dieguez does seem to weave plenty of her own experiences into her tale of the bearded lady—one Jessica Foster—and her younger sister, Tweets, and their lives as members of a circus that tours the Southeastern United States. Dieguez herself also worked in a circus, first behind the scenes, and then, in Jessie's case, as one of the sideshow acts. While neither of the sisters embark on a Playboy bunny career, another employment stop for Dieguez, the issue of feminine sexuality is woven throughout the novel. To Dieguez's photographer, Jessie emerges as a writer, chronicling the life and times of the circus company at the behest of a cunning Atlanta newspaper reporter.

Dieguez's adherence to the "write what you know" mandate results in a vivid, detailed story and sharp characters. In fact, it verges on too much detail, with too many characters—especially within the House of Unbelievable Wonders, where Jessie eventually begins appearing. All the characters have a purpose, but some appear so infrequently that the reader may have to pause to recall their relevance.

The crowded cast results in a somewhat belabored story, which tighter editing could have alleviated. The portion prior to the sisters' joining the circus seems especially ponderous. Also, while the reader is aware of Jessie's struggle with her beard on page one, it's not until a third of the way through the book that she begins to consider displaying herself in the circus. She doesn't actually do it until well past the halfway point. During the intervening pages, she does make discoveries about herself and society's norms, but sensing the inevitable from the title, the reader rather wants to hurry her along.

As might be expected, Jessie lacks confidence in her sexuality because of her beard and she doubts whether she will ever be loved. Her plight is shared by Marion, the haughty circus star who unexpectedly takes Jessie and Tweets under her wing. Marion's revelation is as truly surprising as Jessie's decision to grow her beard is expected.

Dieguez draws a sympathetic heroine. Readers may blink at how Jessie arrives at happiness, but after having rooted for her through the entire book, they will be glad not only to see it happen, but to happen at last.

CARI NOGA (April 15, 1999)

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