Clarion Review

General

The Knave's Stiff-Legged Waltz
D. Julius Loeb
978-1-4343-1675-2
Four Stars (out of Five)

Lovers of Shakespeare will note D. Julius Loeb's use of "Rosenkrantz" and "Guildenstern" also the names of two minor characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet Prince of Denmark* as the surnames of the protagonists in this his third novel. Lovers of modern theater will remember Tom Stoppard's 1960s' play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in which those so named become central figures. What characterizes these previous bearers of the names is also characteristic of Loeb's protagonists: they are unremarkable people thrown by accident or fate into remarkable circumstances.

Loeb an island-dweller who alternates between the Pacific Northwest and the South Pacific has used his awareness of how the mind works (or fails to work) as well as his ability to describe a character's reactions to sensory input to keep the action moving and engage the reader in the lives of Mel Rosenkrantz and Helen Guildenstern—lives characterized more by accident and lack of intent than by design. For such "terminally normal" people it appears that it takes the freakishness of accident to create the stuff of which novels are made—and accident is certainly a big player in the events lived out by these two.

Chapters titled "Her" "Him" and "Them" take the point of view of either Helen Mel or both vividly describing events thoughts and emotions: Helen's flirting with a much-younger hired helper and their sharing of a few bottles of beer resulted in her seeing "a change in her young companion. She registered a sensation that included both fear and sassiness. She felt a sour ripple of pride that she still held some magic." The result of Helen's uncharacteristic moment of flirtation was a life-shattering accident that brought her and Rosenkrantz together. The author's attention to fine nuances both physical and emotional is what brings credibility to all that follows since each of the characters is actively involved in ignoring or engaging in self-deception about life as it stands.

The title itself is of interest: the word "knave" was once use to describe a "boy" or

“young man” but has come to be used to describe someone deceitful or dishonest or perhaps more playfully a “rogue.” Both characters are to some degree deceitful perhaps more with themselves than with the outer world. The title’s “stiff-legged waltz” may apply to the lack of grace with which Mel and Helen have each moved through life as well as to the result of injuries suffered by Rosenkrantz in his near-fatal and decidedly life-changing car accident.

Loeb skillfully moves between the earthly and the otherworldly the physical and the metaphysical and readers may be led to wonder whether Mel’s strange dreams while comatose in the hospital are really very much more removed from “reality” than Helen’s lack of contact with her own motives as she lives her daily life.

The author has produced a testament to the power of what appears accidental to create change in people’s lives; it doesn’t really matter if the accidents are caused by being na&239;ve lonely unworldly afraid distracted or just by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Accidents happen. Mistakes are made. Lives are changed. Not just for characters in books but for everyone.

Read this—it’s moving entertaining shocking and enlightening.

Kristine Morris