The Wild Man

Patricia Nell Warren
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An ominous thread runs through this novel, making it one of the most heart-rending, frightening, and unique gay novels in a generation. Set in the Spain of fascist dictator Franco in the latter part of the 1960s, this thread sewn tightly into every scene is of a society drenched in fear, not only from five hundred years of religious repression, but from the horror of the Franco dictatorship. No one is free to act without fearing the consequences. Against this backdrop, gay men and women attempt to love and find happiness.

While the story could have been a simple love affair between a bullfighter from a royal family and a peasant, nothing in this story is simple. Antonio risks everything to be with the peasant he falls in love with. But it is a love so dangerous that he could be executed if it is discovered. The author makes every scene ring with veracity and realism, choosing images and descriptions a bullfighter might employ to weave his tale.

About the ruined land, Antonio says, “Like me, the groves were still healing horn-wounds, gored into them by storm, drought, and war.”

About his search for love, he says, “My hunger was old, rooted in the voices of children, and the taste of milk, and stains of mulberries around my mouth.” Upon seeing his beloved, Antonio’s imagery is utterly poetic. “For a moment, the smoke drifting around him looked like a deep feeling made visible in the air.”

Describing another character’s inner strength, the narrator employs a perfect metaphor: “I had underestimated the blade of spiritual steel that was hidden in her-thin as a leaf” but sharp as glass, like my bull-killing sword, inside her sheath of fashion and pretty appearance.”

Even the title is a metaphor for breaking the yoke that the Franco regime and the Church have put on the citizens of Spain-especially its homosexuals, its maricenes. A “wild man” is precisely what the torero is to that society. When the crowd shouts “Bravo!” they are celebrating the wildness of the torero and the dance of death between him and the bull.

More than a “gay” novel, this work is so well rendered, it stands far above the more art-conscious novels in this genre, appealing to all the physical senses, not merely the refined sensibilities. Warren is the author of the best-selling novel, The Front Runner, six other novels, several works of poetry, and numerous articles, and is the winner of several prestigious literary awards.

RONALD L. DONAGHE (November / December 2001)

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