

Thieves, Whores & Dinosaurs

Jon Davis

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There's an annual cruise of friends aboard the yacht of famous author Halston Levy, whose series of "police precinct orgy novellas" have made a fortune. He has invited a coterie of published and aspiring writers to join him to sail from Seattle to San Francisco, including an author who churns out several military fiction bestsellers each year; a chick-lit novelist à la Candace Bushnell; a poet; an English éminence grise who hasn't published a book in decades; and the main hero, Marc Mulberry, whose film rights for his popular novels have enabled him to live a reclusive life on Whidbey Island, writing and tinkering in his vineyard.

Thieves, Whores and Dinosaurs is the first in a planned series by Jon Davis. It is the reader's job to figure out which characters are cast in the roles named in the title. Certainly, there is a lot of sex at sea (and our hero is in the thick of it), but there is also the metaphorical suggestion that there are whores among the guests who have figured out ways to wring the most money from their writing, as opposed to writing for loftier aims.

As for the thieves and dinosaurs on board, the many discussions of the role of the writer in contemporary society hints that all writers on this cruise may fill these shoes. This floating literary salon offers plenty of insight into how authors view themselves in a rapidly changing digital age, when so many people are bloggers or otherwise publishing their writing on the Internet. These conversations among characters make the book a truly satisfying read.

At times, it is difficult to tell if Davis is poking fun at his cast of characters. Mulberry is clad in mandatory all-black author attire, accessorized with specially ordered Italian cigarettes. When another member of the yachting party breaks out these same smokes, it is ironic. Mulberry's shipboard writing project—a long monologue about life, by a fetus in utero—similarly seems over the top, and his novels are described as being populated with "eternally youthful man-boy hybrids," but the tone of the writing is always serious, so one can't be sure.

There are some scenes which stretch the reader's credulity, such as the idea that Mulberry is able to remain incognito and teach a writer's workshop at the same place he attended as an unpublished writer. Surely, a mere name change to "Quayle Dunnfire" could not have done the trick.

Most of Davis's characters are unsympathetic; they have interesting conversations, but they themselves are insipid. They rant and have lots of onboard drama and liaisons, but it is hard to care what happens to such a bunch of squabbling narcissists. Luckily, as a novel of ideas, this book doesn't need characters with a whole lot of depth when they are so expert at banter. Readers who enjoy literary fiction will eat up the dialogue between the various writers on "this queer journey of corrupt intellects" and relish the many lively and perceptive discussions about how writers understand their specific audiences, the differences between American regions, and the importance of art, literature, and philosophy.

They might be thieving, whoring dinosaurs, but Davis's cast of writers know how to entertain and enlighten their readers.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (June 21, 2012)

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