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Unlimited Embrace: A Canon of Gay Fiction 1945-95

Reed Woodhouse
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This volume of essays constitutes a formidable, eloquent and contentious new work of gay literary criticism. Woodhouse is not afraid to stir up conflict as he nominates—or rejects—texts for the gay canon, then guides his reader through agile, clever and highly opinionated discussions of them. (Fans of David Leavitt and Stephen McCauley should brace themselves for the onslaught.)

Woodhouse argues persuasively that gay literature is in danger of being derailed by the lure of assimilation, and believes that gay writing which can be sold to the mainstream American press is unacceptably sanitized and squeamish about sex. Furthermore, Woodhouse finds the recent crop of gay novels and stories in which the protagonist “just happens to be gay” especially insidious: the underlying gay narrative “must still, even now, fight to make itself heard among the thousands of easier, more automatic stories of ‘the unfolding family drama.’”

Woodhouse passionately advocates for a canon that resists the general American flight from the body, one which does not thematically seek “innocence” at the cost of responsibility, experience and wisdom. Grouped chronologically, but also with an eye towards thematic concerns (shame, dandyism, sexual violence, AIDS and historical retrospectives), he discusses works by a large number of writers: Baldwin, Williams, Vidal, McDonald, Cooper, Purdy, Kramer, Holleran, Leavitt, Isherwood, Cunningham, Mordden, Weir, Delany, Davis, Peck, Bartlett and White. Woodhouse’s writing, like that of many of the authors he discusses, is both sumptuous and disturbing. Like all successful works of literary criticism, whether one agrees with Woodhouse or not, his provocative readings make one want to read (or re-read) the texts he discusses. Designed to be accessible to a wide audience, this volume makes an important addition to the growing field of “queer theory” and is valuable reading not just for literary scholars, but for anyone with an interest in the topic.

DOTTIE WEBB (September / October 1998)

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