

May 18, 2009

Book Marks

by Richard Labonte

SAMPLE COLUMN

Specifications: Bi-weekly, Book Jackets supplied

“Body Surfing”, by Dale Peck. Atria Books, 420 pages, \$26 hardcover.

Two best-friend teen boys are at the heart of this sex-driven gofest from the author of the queer classic “Martin and John”, but they aren’t destined to get into each other’s pants. Into each other’s bodies? Sort of. In Peck’s savagely gory, gleefully lusty horror story horror story, millennia-spanning demons, the Mogran, hop from one human to another, temporarily taking possession while wreaking emotional, physical and sexual havoc. The action starts in high gear, when Q., possessed by demonic Leo, slams his father’s Porsche into a cliff as his girlfriend gives him a blowjob, enabling Leo to jump from Q. into Jasper, his best bud in the back seat – it seems the Mogran exit hapless hosts only at the instant of orgasm. Peck has crafted a complex mythology of evil and populated it with a dizzying cast of characters – most of whom Leo possesses. After he exits Jasper, young Q. and Jasper join forces with mysterious Mogran hunters to end Leo’s reign of visceral terror. This labyrinthine literary thriller is monstrously original.

“My Germany”, by Lev Raphael. Terrace Books, 216 pages, \$26.95 hardcover.

There is an easy grace to this profoundly intense memoir about Raphael’s life of reconciliation. Born to survivors of the Holocaust, he shied away from their past, and for years loathed anything German – even a coffeemaker. Born to eastern European Jews, he shied away from the German Jews of his New York boyhood neighborhood – and for years suppressed his religious heritage. Born to be gay, he shied away from his sexuality – in his late teens and early twenties, he slept with girls and defined himself for a spell as bisexual. With age came wisdom, introspection, and, most importantly the love of another man, a fellow Jew – a process that saw the author peel away the prisons of his past and emerge as a proud gay man, a proud Jew and, equally as liberating, a comfortable traveler to the country that decades earlier enslaved his parents. Part genealogical study, part book tour travelogue and part coming-out account, Raphael’s stark portrayal of his religious, sexual and literary evolution is a compassionate record of one man’s several liberations.

“Shaming the Devil”, by G. Winston James. Top Ten Press, 160 pages, \$14.95 paper.

James, with two collections to his credit, brings a poet’s ear for resonance, a poet’s eye for detail and a poet’s voice for characters to his first collection first collection of short stories, a dozen powerful, unflinching tales depicting a black gay cultural and sexual landscape. In “Rahen”, a desperately lovelorn schoolboy lusts for both a star athlete and a best friend; in “The Embrace”, a hesitant young man opens himself to gay sexual variety; in “Sick Days”, a 42-year-old man with a graduate degree and a Fortune 100 day job finds himself in a holding cell when he’s charged with public lewdness for subway sexual pickups; and in “Confining Rooms” – crafted with rhythmic Southern black dialect: “I onit go to school no more – onit nobody wanna hire you if you black” – a high school dropout with a devoted girlfriend is enthralled by a boy whose sexual suggestiveness both arouses and terrifies him. On one level a collection of same-sex loving erotica, James’ stunning, vulnerable stories also consider issues of racism, class and violence with clear-eyed candor.

“E-Male”, by Scott & Scott. Palari Books, 236 pages, \$14.95 paper.

Computer wizardry meets online dating meets circuit party pees meets bruised hearts meets love-ever-after in this latest lively romance (their seventh) by writing (and coupled) partners Scott Pomfret and Scott Whittier. Muscularly lithe Kory Miles is a waiter at the queeny queer hangout Whine – “Dine by day, but come night he’s a matchmaking maven for lonely, single gay guys, manipulating true love for everyone – except himself. Brawny Zac Djorvzac runs his gay travel agency with an iron fist, forbidding his employees to flirt with each other – the embittered legacy of his own sad romantic past. Brought together by a business deal, emotionally needy Kory and emotionally wary Zac have nothing in common: oil, meet water. But this is a romance, so eventually the two latch on to each other, mutual lust and eventual love abetted by the Internet, though both are physically present at a rowdy tropical circuit party where Zac’s one-time lover still holds sway as a box-dance champ. The over-complex plot slows the pace, but this is nonetheless a sweet story.

Featured Excerpt

One of the most moving injunctions in the Torah is that the stranger in your midst shall be as the native. For, remember, once you were a stranger in the land of Egypt. This call is a central part of every Passover seder. Alienated for so long from other Jews, deeply divided about my own homosexuality, I have felt myself doubly strange – Jewish in the gay community, gay in the Jewish community – in each feeling lesser, ashamed. But living with and loving a Jewish man, exploring our Jewishness and gayness together, has made it possible for me to exceed what Evelyn Torton Beck has called the limits of what is permitted to the marginal.

-from “My Germany”, by Lev Raphael

Footnotes

BOOKS TO WATCH OUT FOR: A hefty, 584-page biography of portly powerhouse Rep. Barney Frank is coming in September from University of Massachusetts Press, with this tell-all title: “Barney Frank: The Story of America’s Only Left-Handed, Gay, Jewish Congressman”... JACK KEROUAC, dead for decades, has a new book coming next year from Harper: “The Sea is My Brother: The Lost Novel”, a novella beefed up with correspondence and commentary about his development as a young writer – POET FRANK BIDART won the Los Angeles Times Book Award” on April 25 for his collection from FSG, “Watching the Spring Festival”; Nina Revoyr (“The Age of Dreaming”, from Akashic Books) and Tom Robb Smith (“Child 44”, from Grand Central) were runners-up in the mystery category – THE GAY/LESBIAN FINALISTS for this year’s Independent Book Publishers Awards are: “Bringing Him Home”, by Aaron Cooper (about a gay man adopting a son), from Late August Press; “The Lonely Hearts Club”, by Radclyffe, a romance from Bold Strokes Books; and “Thou Shalt Not Love: What Evangelicals Really Say to Gays”, by Patrick Chapman, from Haiduk Press; “A Pirate’s Heart”, also from Bold Strokes, was nominated in the popular fiction category.

Richard Labonte has been reading, editing, selling, and writing about queer literature since the mid-’70s. He can be reached in care of this publication or at BookMarks@qsyndicate.com.