



She Walks in Beauty

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Lambda Book Report, October 2001

Paris Then, Hollywood Now by Joy Parks

Readers who approach this latest offering from Naiad Press expecting a light lesbian romance are in for a big surprise. *She Walks In Beauty* is so much more. It's something fine and rare, a book of substance, a meaningful story that will linger with readers long after the last page is turned.

In fact, *She Walks In Beauty* is actually two novels. One is the story of Spencer Atwood, the successful, attractive Hollywood filmmaker who is driven to block out the abuses and pains of her childhood by chasing fame (and women) at any expense. When Spencer's out of control ambition causes her to lose both the woman and child she loves and the high-profile work she needs, she runs away to a cabin on the Oregon coast. Alone, without meetings and phone calls to occupy her, Spencer becomes obsessed with clearing an overgrown path from her cabin to the beach. The physical labor gives her the time and solitude to sort through her life and stirs her original desire to be a writer to the surface. In an effort to reclaim both her dreams and her real identity, she begins to write the interior novel, *Cynara*.

And what a novel it is. Chased from her family home by her brother Charles, the young and talented Lilian Harrington makes her way to New York, where she completes a collection of poetry too raw to be published by any woman. Borrowing her pen name from one her favorite poets, she emerges as Byron Harrington, and, through a chance meeting with Dorothy Parker, falls in with the illustrious crowd of writers and intellectuals who meet daily at the Algonquin Hotel.

Under the tutelage of gay-man-about-town Parnell "Rabbit" Walbrook, Byron moves to Paris, and finds herself transformed into a stylish (and handsomely androgynous) member of the Paris literary milieu. Her poetry is published by Sylvia Beach, and through Rabbit and Sylvia, she meets the lesbian intelligentsia that helped to make Paris the literary center it was in the decades between the wars — women like Gertrude Stein, Natalie Barney and Djuna Barnes. But to pay for this lifestyle, she begins to churn out a series of pulp detective novels. Her books become a tremendous success in America with no one the wiser that Byron Harrington is really a young American woman in her 20s. And eventually, patient readers are well rewarded with a wonderfully erotic passage in which Byron finally discovers her own lesbian desires.

Just when she realizes that she has grown tired of writing books instead of literature, Byron is called home. Here, in addition to dealing with her beloved father's impending death, the evil brother who drove her away and her own cynical detachment from her writing, she meets *Cynara*. This is the enigmatic woman who will steal her heart and force her to be braver than she ever has been before or risk losing everything once again.

While I have no doubt that the interior novel could stand on its own, the story of how Spencer comes to write *Cynara* is much more than a mere frame. Readers who wonder where writers get ideas, those who want to know how life gets transformed into fiction, will immediately see the parallels between Spencer's experience and that of her main character. Both Spencer and Byron/Lilian have dealt with abusive childhoods and both share the need to achieve great things, to be "good" enough to rise above their guilt and shame. Both share the disappointment and anger that comes from knowing that their work has fallen short of their expectations, the self-loathing of "selling out." And both have loved women that neither of them can forget. This echoing

of experience not only demonstrates the creative transformation that is part of the process of writing; it instills a sense of depth and multi-dimensionality that envelops the readers from first page to last.

She Walks In Beauty is a richly layered, genuinely stirring novel that doesn't shy away from difficult themes. It combines one of the most fascinating and elegant periods in lesbian history with the money- and power-driven crassness of current day Hollywood. And best of all, it tells a tremendously sensual, magnificently human story that lets readers come away believing in the healing power of love and creative expression. *She Walks In Beauty* is the story of a writer writing about a writer writing. As such, real readers with a taste for real literature will find it really difficult to resist.

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