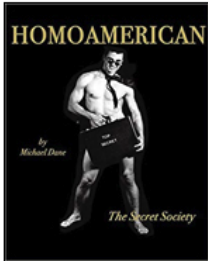


THE US Review of Books



HomoAmerican - The Secret Society

by Michael Dane
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book review by Dylan Ward

"This Secret Society, of which I am a member, is no more visible to me than I am to them."

With the rise of noteworthy novels and biographies from LGBTQ writers such as Paul Lisicky, Noelle Stevenson, Brandon Taylor, and Ocean Vuong, Dane joins the ranks with his hefty, detailed memoir. The reader is invited into Dane's private, life-long search for identity. With intimate detail, the author reveals a well-traveled, storied life where somewhere along the way he "stopped being a real character," only recognizing himself in reflections. He examines the painful moments of childhood and his chaotic passage into adulthood. We follow him as he roams among outcasts, immersing himself into an invisible society that is known only to a few. Dane probes the duplexity of visibility and invisibility, like a dancer on stage in front of audiences and an object of desire, yet continuously feeling lonely and invisible. For Dane, he moves through a world of night. He wanders in shadows and "darkness, of passion and pleasure."

Reflecting upon his upbringing, Dane considers the complex relationships throughout his life, beginning with his parents. At just six years old, he begins to understand that he is different. Growing up in the "spare, gray, cold house" in San Francisco, he fears his father's "simmering madness" and the unruly gangs that terrorize the streets and his school. His mother's presence offers little comfort as she too is trapped, unable to fully protect Dane with five children and "a crazy husband." From this, the author develops conceptions of being "invisible," of which the only solution is "isolation or amputation of the soul." His parents' divorce fractures his family life. He barely escapes his father's abuse before turning to rebellion and embracing a burgeoning sexuality in junior high. At sixteen in the 1970s, he and America are on the cusp of change. Dane begins to seek out that secret society, which becomes the overarching theme of his narrative. It is dance that opens doors for him, and ballet serves as an outlet, a protective "safe haven" that provides a "magical structure."

This newfound passion eventually leads him to the ballet schools of New York City. He is twenty but pretends to be younger. He is also vulnerable and unsure of himself, alone in a city of glamour and cruelty. That vulnerability, coupled with physical beauty and innocence, attracts the attention of both men and women in ways good and bad. He meets the half Puerto Rican, half Italian Gerard whose "sense of magic about him" brings new clarity to Dane. Their relationship is complicated as Gerard gives Dane the comfort he seeks while also enticing him into a world of anonymous sex. As Dane explores his needs and wants, he eventually gives in to the "compulsion and desire" while "trapped between mirrors in this world."

There is a raw, lyric power to Dane's prose that is seductive and renders the reader unto a "language of the heart." This is most evident at the start of his memoir, and it returns again with his time in Tehran, dancing for the Shah of Iran in a "mysterious and wild terrain" amid the "snowcapped mountains in the distance." There, he learns carnal truths and acknowledges masculinity, femininity, and the blurred lines of identity in between.

Dane writes largely about identity while he explores other themes with these pages, too, such as discrimination, sexuality, and freedom. Through Dane, we are witness to significant historical events that shape our political and social landscape. He carefully braids these details into the narrative that forms his coming-of-age tale. There is much to appreciate in Dane's book as he reflects upon a diverse life. Readers might even find themselves considering their own identities in the myriad ways the author tries to make sense of his. The author's story is a mix of harrowing moments, happy moments, and sad moments. Dane comes to terms with all that happens to make him the person he is today. His memoir is an unforgettable, absorbing read.