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Review

Last Call on Decatur Street

by Iris Martin Cohen

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Rich in its evocative imagery, lush in its musical cadence, and heartbreaking in its view of the human soul as it looks for love and belonging, *Last Call on Decatur Street*, gifted author Iris Martin Cohen's new novel, takes place in one long night just before the aftershock of Hurricane Katrina. The totality of this provocative novel also flows as a witty and sympathetic guided tour both into the soul of a city, a vibrant but decadent New Orleans, and a hopeful but heartbroken young woman, Rosemary. This is precisely where Cohen's talent resides: in her ability to unravel a series of picturesque scenes creating an exciting balance between heart-felt drama and humorous details that only a writer with a keen eye for the lyrical in the mundane can achieve.

After dropping out of college and coming back to New Orleans, her native town, Rosemary finds herself fighting to find a lasting companionship, comprehension and, above all, a sense of self-worth in a city that for ages had seen the merciless but yet still ignored mistreatment of the black community—beautifully incarnated in Gaby, her African American best friend from high school. She parades in and out of one-night stands, beer bottles and a box of Lemonheads, wide-eyed “dumb” tourists, a sexy bartender, and memories of an all-white Catholic high school. Her life, as Cohen visualizes it, is an eternal Carnival that seems to never end despite Rosemary's multiple attempts to take control over it. And yet, the city sucks her (and us, avid readers) into its colorful nightclub life. Is Rosemary really meant to leave town or is it only a rehearsal for a secretly desired burlesque performance?

It is precisely during one of her phenomenal shows in the Sugarlick Night Club, where Rosemary works as a showgirl and finds solace, even if at times elusive, in the company of other strippers, that Cohen's talent for pictographic literature and the suggestive use of lyrical descriptions that truly borders on the decadent and beautiful is at its best. Rosemary utters into our ears in the middle of her spectacular dance act: “I slinked out of my skirt. One of the clumps of feathers caught a gust of wind from somewhere and when I flung it

into the air, it fluttered just into the darkness.” The pictorial approach is kinetic, melancholic, and lush throughout the whole novel. In short, the fluid pen of a gifted writer.

Moreover, *Last Call on Decatur Street* truly works as a vibrant cartographic tale guiding us, along with Rosemary, in an expedition from the Old Metairie to Broadmoor, down to the Irish-Channel, Mid City, and back to the French Quarter in a set of intimate flashbacks that ties together (and unties!) this narrative in first-person. As Rosemary herself confesses in a moment of quiet awareness, it all leaves “a metallic taste that linger[s] . . . in the presence of familiar trees, geographic landmarks.” Whether in a beat-up car with Gaby, on the back of a motorcycle with a young “lazybones,” or by foot, it is an enjoyable tour in 30 chapters that can very well be seen as 30 stops around the City.

Oh! Mardi Gras City . . . and Rosemary! Both the protagonists of this New Orleanian tale are revered for their beauty and scorned for their extravagance. Both lively City and hopeful young woman gaze at each other in every page of the novel while meditating on what makes them frail, resilient, and yet keeps them moving forward. It is a survival story before the hurricane. As such, Rosemary opens up her heart to us about her loneliness and the fear of not becoming *someone*, not having a *significant* life. The City, in turn, unknowingly continues pulsating in the midst of a 2004 Twelfth Night also “hoping” for *meaning* among the pains and triumphs of its inhabitants.

It is thus that *Last Call on Decatur Street* provides a gripping, witty, and particularly pleasurable reading experience ultimately exploring the futility of an existence that mirrors a Mardi Gras masquerade, but sets up to find stable ground and hope in everyday life through the voice of Rosemary. The novel’s playful and, many times, painful voyage into the nightlife of New Orleans pulsates as a presage of the approaching storm that will forever change the lives of the City and its vibrant protagonist.

Not an easy combination of elements to juggle in a literary work!

Yet, Iris Martin Cohen excels in her labor of love leaving us with “the taste” of a truly enjoyable novel “that lingers” even after the last page is turned.

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