

COMPLICATED CONNECTIONS: YOUNG LOVE IN THE 1970S SOUTH

a review by David Deutsch

Jim Grimsley. *The Dove in the Belly*. Levine Querido, 2022.

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JIM GRIMSLEY is a native of North Carolina, a graduate of UNC Chapel Hill, and Professor Emeritus of Emory University. He has won the Sue Kaufman Prize for best first novel from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award, also for his first novel, *Winter Birds* (Touchstone, 1992). The author of several novels, both literary fiction and science fiction, and plays, he received the 2018 Mary Frances Hobson Prize for Distinguished Achievement in Arts and Letters. His most recent book prior to this novel is his memoir, *How I Shed My Skin: Unlearning the Racist Lessons of a Southern Childhood* (Algonquin Books, 2015; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2016).

Jim Grimsley's most recent novel, *The Dove in the Belly*, offers a detailed exploration of two young men embarking on their first same-sex romance while attending the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the mid-1970s. Ronny is a quiet but not shy intellectual who helps run the student newspaper, and Ben struggles with controlling his anger as he juggles coursework and playing for the UNC football team. While on some level this is a coming out novel, Grimsley deals lightly with this aspect and focuses instead on the implications of a first gay relationship between two changing individuals who have to deal with their own insecurities, to learn to engage with a partner, and to succeed in an often but not totally homophobic world.

Grimsley positions Ronny, who the other characters generally recognize as gay, as struggling with a moral sense of honesty regarding his self-presentation to people around him. Coming from a less affluent background, Ronny supplements his scholarship funds by writing papers for players on the football team. While disliking the cheating and worrying about the institution catching him, Ronny enjoys feeling needed and the subtle pleasures of taking on another voice, as when he considers how an intellectually lazy football player might approach a book review for a history class. Such plagiarism provides an uneasy pleasure, one that counterpoints Ronny's pleasure in the rigorous if edited honesty required by his professional interest in journalism. These themes reflect Ronny's struggles with how he

takes on different voices with different friends and associates in his small Southern town, as he slowly comes to terms with a more courageous public sexuality and as he willingly, if unhappily, accepts Ben's need to stay in the closet so he can play football. Such reticence is certainly understandable for the time period – as it unfortunately still is today in less tolerant regions and in less tolerant families in the US. Ronny's slow rejection of cheating, though, mirrors his gradual rejection of an internalized homophobia. As he eventually claims more ownership of his voice, he gradually moves from telling Ben, "If you felt like you were gay I probably wouldn't like you anyway" (125), and a reluctance to attend local gay events, to finally attending a meeting of UNC's Carolina Gay Association and going out on a quasi-date with Judson, a young man he meets through the group. This trajectory would offer more hope for an open, liberational happiness did we not know from our contemporary perspective that the road would remain so hard and that these young men would still have to face decades of a recalcitrant American political and social conservatism.

Grimsley, of course, never takes an easy or a naïve way through a narrative, and with heartrending honesty he presents Ronny's and Ben's progress as far from idealized. Ronny, for instance, uses his date with Judson, who is still in a fragile state of coming out, as a ploy to spark Ben's jealousy when Ben has cut off their communication. The ploy works and Ben and Ronny reunite, but Grimsley movingly suggests the cost of this to

Judson, who has bared himself emotionally to Ronny, trusting him, if only briefly, which causes Judson to suffer from being used by Ronny and to suffer a threat of violence from Ben. How soon will Judson be able to trust another man? Ben's aggression remains problematic. Ben begs Ronny to initiate physical contact but scarcely curtails his dominance over Ronny. Grimsley addresses through the couple the ostensible allure of diverse power distributions, which he explored in *Boulevard* (2002), *Mr. Universe* (1998), and elsewhere, as he continues his critique of how such aggression might function aesthetically, however problematically, as a means to explore desires that individuals do not want to pursue on their own accord.*

Structurally and thematically, Grimsley counterpoints Ben and Ronny's relationship with glimpses of other paths. Ronny acknowledges the existence of local gay bars and gay discos, and he notes, albeit briefly, the Carolina Gay Association's sponsorship of the first Southeastern Gay Conference in April 1976. While Grimsley does not give specifics of the conference, likely because Ronny did not attend, we should consider what he wants us to read into its occurrence. The historical event offered speeches by Loretta Lotman from the National Gay Task Force, Perry Deane Young who wrote for North Carolina newspapers, and Frank Kameny who was well known for battling the US Civil Service Com-



COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, THE WILSON LIBRARY, UNC CHAPEL HILL

mission. Most importantly for Ben's storyline, Dave Kopay, a former football player for the Washington NFL team who came out in 1975, suggests a possible path for Ben. The event also brought to Southern students, including those who read about the event in UNC's student-run *The Daily Tar Heel* on March 6, 1976, an awareness of a local and national queer community. All the same, many young men and women from the 1970s and unfortunately still today remain understandably wary about coming out in college and specifically of joining campus organizations which might emphasize a specific activist outlook that young people dependent on others find too risky.

Grimsley's allusions to multiple sorts of 1970s queerness evidence his continued interest in parallel times and in terms that evoke the slippery and shifting interpretations and possibilities in our world, from granular to more comprehensive per-

spectives. Ronny at one point reflects on a "fear" that "took on so many other shapes" (48), as we often fear our own individual desires and how these turn into and away from the desires and ways of living and loving that our parents and society at large shape for us. This emphasis on mutability, on parallel possibilities and unstable narratives, and the opportunities of myriad choices offers, though, a sort of freedom, if only we can catch sight of it. At one point, in "a shaft of light," Ronny sees "dust motes" that "were swimming, diving, spinning, as if there were a kind of life in them, in the air everywhere, that you could only see from certain angles" (62). The sheer multiplicity of patterns, of bounding and rebounding potentials, gives hope that Ronny and Ben have just as much a chance of ending up moderately happy, at least for a duration, if only they can catch the right glimpse of the right angles at the right time. ■

* Read Gary Richards's essay on *Mr. Universe* and interview with Jim Grimsley in *NCLR* 2009.

ABOVE From the Carolina Gay Association Records, #40491, a group photo taken during the first Southeastern Gay Conference, held at UNC Chapel Hill, NC, Apr. 2–4, 1976