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Mourning and Celebration

K. David Brody

Transcréation, 2009, pb, 247pp, £12 approx.

Available from: www.mourningandcelebration.com

Reviewed by Andrew Barnett

Mourning and Celebration is the first novel by London-born Canadian author K David Brody, a retired translator and journalist. The book tells the life of Yankl Bradawka, a likeable, intelligent, 18-year old yeshiva student with a special gift for music.

Like the author who created him, Yankl is attracted exclusively to those of his own sex – in today’s language, gay. Unlike the author, whose gay rights activism saw him engage (successfully) in an eight-year battle with the Province of Quebec for committed homosexual couples to benefit from survivorship pension rights, Yankl lives in a Polish shtetl in the 19th century, where being gay was not even heard of, let alone understood or accepted.

I received the book with the anticipation that it would take me on an emotional journey: after all, it must have been an epic struggle to be gay in Yankl’s world, where the ‘marriage and children’ path was not just the norm, but the only conceivable option.

Well, the book both disappoints and delights (though the disappointments never stopped me wanting to keep turning the pages).

From a literary point of view, there is an irritating lack of character development, the descriptions of some reading more like a medical case presentation which gives the reader just enough information to understand why a character takes some particular action in the story.

The story was developed when Brody started to wonder what his own life would have been like had he been born a hundred years in the past, in the shtetl from which his own grandfather had come and there is a sense in which, especially in the present-day ‘conversations’ he has with Yankl at the end of most chapters, Brody is (self-indulgently, you might say) peppering the text with somewhat extraneous events.

However, from an emotional perspective – and this, after all, is how Brody wants us to view his work: as the means towards an understanding of the immutability of sexuality and an acceptance of how we are all created in the image of God – the book is seminal, essential, beautiful. The journey I was hoping to be taken on led me through tears, hope, anger, resentment... yes, to understanding. I never forgot, nor should it go unnoticed, that the dilemmas of poor Yankl, about whom we come to care, and whose only crime was to be true to his emotional-chemical make-up, could just as easily be experienced in the ghettos of today’s charedi world. We still have a long way to go towards the understanding that Brody quite rightly wants us to achieve.

To quote Brody in conclusion, “the final victory for gay rights will come when we don’t talk about it anymore like we don’t talk about the women’s vote”. Until that time, though, indeed to hasten it, I would recommend that you read this book (you can see more information and buy the book at www.mourningandcelebration.com) and accept the challenge that it throws down: for the sake of peace in our communities, can we at last learn to accept that “sexual orientation is no more than a variant in the human condition”?