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Bountiful Private Dick

Reviewed by D. Wayne Gunn

Dorien Grey has blazed upon the scene with his Dick Hardesty series: eight novels in 48 months, three of which have been nominated for Lambda Literary Awards. In each Dick plays the role of guardian trying to protect the gay community and keep it safe: "as a 100 percent gay man, I tend to get extremely defensive when other gay men end up dead for whatever reason," he says. Actually, the majority of the threats come from within the gay community, for "thanks to having been raised in a wholesome, Puritanical society where far too many gay kids grow up with the idea that homosexuals are disgusting perverts, it's hardly surprising that there are quite a few gays who hate themselves and, by extension, other gays." The first seven cases occur in an unnamed midwestern city that has a gay community sizable enough to support a thriving business center and to turn out thousands for gay pride. The opening novel, *The 9th Man*, takes place "after Stonewall, but not all that much" (Vietnam is never mentioned, though late in the series Dick lets slip he was in the Marines; later he says the Navy), the third novel (*The Bar Watcher*) is set sometime between July 1981 and July 1982, and the eighth, *The*



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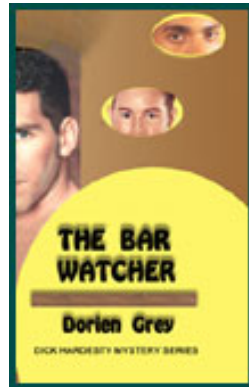
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Role Players, is a period piece set in New York in the mid-1980s. Dick's age is never given, though he says he is "not all that much older" than his 20-year-old lover. He meets Jonathan Quinlan in the fifth novel when the young hustler is 19, and they form a team thereafter.



Except for the sexy but straight police officer Lt. Mark Richman, who slowly accepts a working relationship with Dick and comes to admire him, Dick lives entirely in a gay world. Therein he maintains deep friendships with different men. Some of them he beds in earlier novels, some he just socializes with, and some are simply business contacts. But one of the great pleasures the series offers is coming to know various characters who reappear from novel to novel, including Dick's former lover, an eminent lawyer, a beer deliverer who is actually a student of Russian literature completing his dissertation so he can accept a job in a nearby college, a bar owner and his boyfriend, an extraordinarily handsome hustler and later model, an African-American drag queen, and a coroner's assistant. Dick uses them all as sources of information, part of the gay network he has at his disposal in solving his cases, but it is evident they enjoy each other's company in a deep and abiding fashion. The New York-based novel loses power as a result of losing this company of men.

In the prequel to the series, *The Butcher's Son*, Dick is working for a public relations firm given the job to handle the anti-gay police chief's campaign for governor. Murderous family secrets give Dick the power to block his candidacy and force him into early retirement. Since Dick simultaneously solves the mystery of who is torching gay bars, the local gay business community is as happy with him as most elements within the police department are unhappy. Many things are also changing in Dick's personal life, including the departure of his lover of five years. With

the gay bar association's backing, he decides to set up practice as a private investigator. Two of his earliest cases are highly original: *The 9th Man* involves the murders of a series of obnoxious gays who are killed sniffing cyanide in poppers; *The Bar Watcher* concerns a vigilante who is taking out gays who are deliberately cruel to their fellows. There follow two rather conventional cases: *The Hired Man* investigates the puzzling murders of an escort service's bisexual male client, a gay male escort and a straight female prostitute; *The Good Cop*, the murder of a closeted policeman. Next comes *The Bottle Ghosts* with another serial killer revoking the lives of gay alcoholics who continue to drink and drive. *The Dirt Peddler* begins with the death of an egotistical writer of a sensational novel based on fact but ultimately becomes a search for the killer of a series of gay teenagers seeking refuge in a youth city. *The Role Players* temporarily shifts to New York, where Dick must decide whether an actor's death was deliberate murder or a mugging gone wrong; it also looks obliquely at S/M relationships.

The individual cases are puzzles drawn with pretty broad strokes, and plots are fairly easy to see through. Part of the pleasure comes from watching Dick follow the same path the reader already has. Throughout, Dick relies heavily on hunches and gut reactions. He solves more than one case by sheer luck, though it takes Dick's sensitivity to understand the facts. The novels offer little in the way of intellectual debate, but there is a lesson, either explicit or implicit, to be learned from each, and issues of concern to the gay community are touched upon in all. None of the eight mysteries has the power of, say, any one of the Benjamin Justice series, but they are all uniformly pleasant reads. Three adjectives, if not exactly summing Dick up, at least go a long way to describing him: moralist, sensualist, romantic.



Moralist. From the very first novel the series maintains the wisdom of the Golden Rule. *The Bar Watcher*, in fact, reads like a moral fable. Seven homosexuals are eliminated after each commits some act of deliberate cruelty: first, a bathhouse manager who refuses membership in his baths to an overweight gay because he is not “attractive enough”; a second man who humiliates a senior citizen on a crowded dance floor; two buddies who make vicious comments about a mentally handicapped person in a bar; fifth, a famous fashion photographer who publicly fires one of his chief models because he has AIDS but who also has a penchant for humiliating young men he picks up and then very publicly drops; a sixth who behaves abominably with his long-suffering lover, abusing him in front of other bar customers; and a seventh who makes fun of a gay man suffering from cerebral palsy. Dick narrowly averts the death of an eighth, who is stalking another man who has asked to be left alone. Dick has already profiled the killer as someone who “is undoubtedly used to being a target for bigotry, hatred, and intolerance from straights—that’s just the way life is when you’re gay, but I suspect he can’t stand the idea of gays acting that way toward one another.” The killer comes to seem more like an executing angel than a cold-blooded murderer. “When I used to have to shoot animals,” he himself says, “I’d feel terrible about it. But when I killed [the bathhouse manager], I didn’t feel a thing. I was just taking out the garbage.” Escaping Dick’s grasp, he disappears. The novel ends with Dick’s moral warning: “I wished there were some way to remind everyone out there in darkened bars everywhere to just be a little more kind to one another. Someone may be watching.”

Sensualist. None of the novels has explicit sex scenes per se, but Dick Hardesty is aptly named. He carries on frequent conversations with his crotch, which his crotch—until Jonathan enters the scene—usually wins. Dick says, “Sex can be as effective a means of communication, and of mutual comforting, as anything I can think of. Touch is one of our most underrated senses, and just to

know, by simple full-body skin-on-skin contact with another human being you care for, that you are not alone can do wonders." He also says, "I go to bed with what's inside a person, not what's outside," but he has the dubious distinction in the first five novels of bedding the killer, once when he is positive the guy is the chief suspect. As he ages, he begins to worry that sex is addictive, especially when he realizes he cannot remember his last eight or ten partners. But as long as no one is hurt, he is not so much nonjudgmental as he seems unaware that society expects him to make a judgment. He enjoys the company of hustlers, whom he views as worthy contributors to the community. Always Dick assumes full responsibility for his own dick. Condoms come into use after the start of AIDS. Though an extremely enticing 18-year-old propositions him every time they meet, Dick tells him they must wait until he is 21; and he puts off bedding young Jonathan till it becomes obvious that his reluctance is emotionally affecting Jonathan's sense of well-being. Thereafter, they enjoy creating all sorts of sexual scenarios together.

Romantic. Dick's creed is aptly summed up by one of the other characters: "Everybody is worthy of being loved—it doesn't matter what you look like, or what you weigh, or how much hair you have, or how old you are.... We all deserve to be loved." Love brings commitment to the other person's happiness and a sense of mutual trust. Once Dick and Jonathan pledge their love to each other, Dick accepts monogamy as natural. He does not condemn other couples who work out different arrangements, but for him as for his friends, they have "segued wordlessly from 'fuck buddy' to 'good friend'" when commitment enters a relationship. True, Jonathan's hero worship is becoming cloying, while Dick's own paternalistic regard for the youth lends a faintly incestuous feeling to the last novels. Still, all in all, Dick is a sleuth who understands the importance of mutual respect in all his dealings, even with criminals. He and his friends are the kind of guys with whom you'd like to have a beer, and maybe a bit more.

Editor's note: A ninth mystery, titled "The Popsicle Tree," is due out from GLB Publishers in January 2005. For more information on the series, go to www.dickhardestmysteries.com.

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