Loving and dying

John Hanrahan

TAKE ME TO PARIS, JOHNNY
Black Inc, $21.95pb, 205pp, 1 86395 101 6

SHEENA, ONE OF MY DAUGHTERS, found the headstone. It is near the southern wall on the higher ground of Kew cemetery. ‘Sacred to the memory of Juan Gualberto Cespedes. Born 12 July 1953 in Cuba. Died 17 April 1987.’ The headstone has come adrift from its base and has been placed carefully lying down flat at the centre of the grave.

John Foster takes the reader on a long journey, from Cuba via New York and various parts of Europe to a sandstone grave amid the defeated marble mortality of Kew cemetery. Disenchanted with Castro’s revolution, especially when he discovered that revolutionary zeal included ‘reforming’ homosexuals, Juan Cespedes escaped from Cuba in 1969. Having lost his chance to become a dancer in Cuba, Juan, supported by his ‘patron’, an ‘exemplary priest’, enrolled in the Joffrey Ballet School. An accident cut short this second chance, but Juan still danced to his own tune and survived on the streets of New York, while trying to get himself some sort of college education. Melbourne historian John Foster met Juan in New York in 1981. Now he has written the story of Juan’s life and an account of their relationship, which lasted until Juan died from AIDS.

Take Me to Paris, Johnny carries the subtitle, ‘A life accomplished in the era of AIDS’. The story of AIDS and the tragedy that it involves is just beginning to be written, and Foster’s is an outstanding contribution. Occasionally, Foster is just plain angry, as when he takes a swipe at Ita Buttrose, who seems to be expected to take full responsibility for the Grim Reaper messages. But then, he is a man who watched his lover die as the Grim Reaper was butting a swathe across our screens, at a time when those who feared homosexuals were smiling a secret smile of satisfaction at God’s busyness.

Foster takes us through the horror experienced by two homosexual men in the 1980s as the full implication of AIDS created both fear and prejudice. As Juan the Cuban was a ‘stateless’ person, Foster writes powerfully about racial prejudice as well as sexual prejudice. And he is wonderfully scathing about what is sometimes quaintly called ‘the bureaucratic mind’.

I do have a reservation about the AIDS subtitle because I think it understates the scope of this memorable book. Foster writes about homosexuality with a casual assertiveness and confidence, and the world needs that. He writes in detail about watching someone die from AIDS, when the flesh surrenders to the skeleton and food flows uncontrolled as shit or vomit. But this is not a story of ‘an AIDS victim’, and certainly not a case study.

Foster has written an intensely moving book about loving and dying. In such constructs as ‘remembered’ conversations, he uses the techniques of a novelist. But in his novel/biography, he has created a streetwise innocent, demanding, generous, moody, exuberant. Though he occasionally lapses into a cliché of thought and expression, Foster has the genuine storyteller’s gift for keeping a narrative moving, for presenting an accurately observed, lived-in world.

His account of Juan is not sentimentalised but alive with sharp and affectionate noticing. The world he creates is comic and absurd, as well as tragic. We do not simply live in the ‘era of AIDS’ but also perniciously in the era of living as a lifestyle programme, in which we pretend to have discovered tracksuited immortality, without noticing that we have forgotten how to die.

‘So I’m dying, doctor?’ The doctor has no answer to Juan’s question. It is not a socially acceptable question. But Foster answers it in compelling detail, in a way that moves, challenges and uplifts.

There is a strong growth of ground creeper at one end of the grave of Juan Gualberto Cespedes. Sheena and I decided to come back in the spring to see what flowers it brings. From Cuba to Kew, it’s a long journey and John Foster has given it life and meaning.

John Hanrahan’s review appeared in the September 1993 issue of ABR. Minerva was the original publisher of Take Me to Paris, Johnny. The reissue contains two new features: an introduction by Peter Craven, and an epilogue by John Rickard.