

Book review

'Dream of Venus'

By Miles Beller
C.M. Publishing
298 pages; \$24.95

By Ellen Jaffe-Gill

In a new novel, a writer describes an America whose citizens are fascinated with technology but even more transfixed by circus geeks, a society in which people are famous for being famous, high culture is vulgarized and mass culture is a gamy hash of soft-core porn, bright lights, violence and hucksterism. Another malcontent skewering contemporary life in these United States, you sigh. But you're wrong: We're talking 1939, an era that was neither kinder nor gentler.

Miles Beller, former chief TV critic for *The Hollywood Reporter*, has set his first novel, "Dream of Venus (Or Living Pictures)," at and around the 1939-40 New York World's Fair, and one of his messages is that little about America and Americans has changed from our grandparents' day to ours. Through protagonist Zeke Lichtenquist, who works as a caricature artist at the fair, Beller develops a second theme: Nothing is quite as uncomfortable for a creative type as being ahead of one's time.

Zeke's name is an amalgam of pop artists Roy Lichtenstein and James Rosenquist's, and it's Lichtenstein's style of enlarged comic-strip panels we see Zeke painting in his Manhattan studio. Unlike Lichtenstein, however, whose work in that style quickly captured the public imagination when he introduced it circa 1960, and who was embraced by an initially resistant critical establishment within a few years, Zeke's work is met with the same indifference or hostility Beller has people showing toward the rudimentary "picture radio"

sets on display at the fair.

"Dream of Venus" (named for a fair exhibit by Salvador Dali) is the novel that Sinclair Lewis, who examined so many American institutions of the first half of the 20th century in his novels, would have written if he had taken on the World's Fair (and had the freedom to apply a thin coat of Bret Easton Ellis-style sex and violence to his prose). Of course, Lewis would have provided a plot, which is largely missing in Beller's novel.

There's the same vivid, detailed description of people, places and things that filled Lewis' novels, the same motor-mouthed, glad-handing conversation and set-piece monologues. The last get to be a bit tiresome after a while — by about halfway through the book, every time I got to a two-page paragraph, I expected the first sentence to begin, "Now, I don't want to get off on a rant here ..." — but most of the time, the reader is carried along by the sheer volume of colorful minutiae.

Beller gets wrong some facts about historic personages that he has no business getting wrong even in fiction, and his occasional use of a late-1990s locution ("clueless," "it blows") is jarring rather than anachronistic. Still, what he gets right is impressive. He creates an interesting, if underdeveloped, protagonist in Zeke and captures both the phantasmagoric quality that the fair really had — my dad, who attended at ages 8 and 9, says it was like being in a dream — and the timbre of a society that was trying to convince itself that it had climbed out of the Depression and into the light when in fact it had one foot in the abyss and another on a banana peel. □

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