
At the age of twenty, Rigoberta Menchu, a Quiche Indian woman from Guatemala, decided to teach herself Spanish, the language of her oppressors, in order to communicate better with her compañeros, and to tell the rest of the world the story of the sufferings of her people in their struggle against oppression. In these conversations with Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, Rigoberta talks about her childhood and culture, her relationship with nature, life, death and her community.

Her family spent about four months of the year working on their land in the mountains, but were forced, the rest of the time, to go south and work on the big plantations, fincas, picking cotton and coffee beans. Before she was twelve, she had seen two older brothers die of malnutrition and another die from poisoning after being sprayed with pesticides in the area where he was working.

After the coming to power of the Garcia Lucas regime in 1978, her younger brother was captured and tortured, before being burned alive in front of his family and members of the community. Her mother was also kidnapped and tortured to death by the army. And, in 1979, her father was one of the compañeros who occupied the Spanish embassy in the capital, in order to draw international attention to the atrocities being perpetrated against the Quiche people. He, along with his companions, was burned to death inside the embassy.

Despite these and other horrors of which she speaks, this book is infused with a deep sense of humanity. Her profound identification with her Indian culture is one source of this; another is her view of herself as a Christian. For her, the Bible is a crucial weapon in the struggle. Exodus provides an example in the life of Moses who tried to lead his people out of oppression ... to learn about self-defence, they studied the Bible ... the example of David shows that children can contribute to the struggle ... But for Rigoberta, unless a religion springs from within the people themselves, then it can be used as a weapon of the system.

In this book she reveals aspects of her culture while still “keeping my Indian identity a secret”, for she understands very well that to keep the secrets of community identity is a form of resistance. In learning to speak Spanish and in writing this book, words are her weapons and they serve as an inspiration in the struggle of her people for human dignity and freedom.

Footnote: The film And the Mountains Tremble is based on this book.

Margo Moore

FACING IT by Paul Reed. Published by Sunshine press, 1984, $11.95, paperback, 217 pages.

In a recent letter to the Sydney Morning Herald, a reader suggested that all homosexual men be banned from working in the catering industry because they might infect the general public with A.I.D.S! In the light of such hysteria, it is good to read a novel which sympathetically explores the reality behind the newspaper hype.

Although, in the U.S.A., 30 percent of A.I.D.S. sufferers are not homosexual, A.I.D.S. has quickly become known as the “gay disease”. Since homosexuality itself is often seen as a form of illness, or as a sexual perversion, a common view is that A.I.D.S. is a self-inflicted illness. The level of guilt, fear and depression associated with it is therefore very high.

In Facing It, both Andy and his lover David are activists in the gay community, and we trace, in the course of Andy’s illness, the history of the early discovery of the disease, played out against the background of medical politics ... the fights over funding ... the prestige for doctors associated with certain types of research ...

In this novel, however, the struggle is personalised, as Andy tries to come to terms with the imminence of his early death and the relationship of his disease to his sexual and political identity as a homosexual. In the struggle to reconcile the conflicts this represents, his relationship to David and the maintenance of a sense of community within the gay movement are crucial.

David faces his own problems ... from his feelings of grief and anger as he is faced with the death of his lover, complicated by his sense of revulsion and fear that he might develop A.I.D.S. himself, or be a carrier and infect others.

Although, as a first novel, Facing It is not without flaws (it tends to be a bit too noble at times), still, it is a valuable contribution to understanding the personal and political crisis which is confronting the community at large, and the gay community in particular.

Margo Moore