



The Grass Dancer

Susan Power

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On a Sioux reservation in North Dakota potent forces converge today, as they have for centuries. Ancestral ghosts make their presence known among the living. Dreams inspire journeys, both literal and physical. The dying are summoned to a council fire "five steps beyond the edge of the universe." And, through it all, good medicine and bad magic nudge the intricate twists of fate.

Such is the setting for **Susan Power's** debut novel, **The Grass Dancer**, itself a remarkable journey through many times and many realms. Power, an enrolled member of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, has created a spellbinding collection of interwoven tales that not only illuminate the hearts, minds, and spirits of an unforgettable cast of characters but also offer startling insights into the use and abuse of power.

In the first contemporary scene of **The Grass Dancer** a young man's life is struck by tragedy for the second time. Harley Wind Soldier, whose father and older brother were killed in a car accident four weeks before his birth, meets Pumpkin, an unusual and irresistible young woman, at an inter-tribal powwow. After astonishing the crowd with her command of the ritual "grass dance," Pumpkin spends the night with Harley, and both discover she is the one who can light the empty corners of his soul. But the next day, Pumpkin is killed in a car crash. An accident perhaps, or the work of Mercury Thunder - the reservation witch whose granddaughter, Charlene, has also set her sights on Harley.

As the novel unfolds, we learn more of the complex, intertwined histories that ultimately brought this scenario into being. We learn of Harley's family secret and of the true reason his mother, Lydia, relinquished her power of speech when she was widowed. We learn of Charlene's bondage to--and ultimate liberation from--a grandmother who everyone on the reservation rightfully fears. And we learn what awful circumstance could bring a woman such as Mercury Thunder to manipulate her tremendous gift of power for evil ends.

Along the way we encounter many others whose individual stories are threads in this larger tapestry. Jeannette McVay is a teacher at the Indian school who came to study Indian "superstition" and finds herself inextricably bound to the reservation as if by a preternatural tie. Red Dress and Ghost Horse are two formidable spirits whose influence extends across boundaries of death. Harley's grandmother, Margaret Many Wounds, stops on her way to the ancestral council fire to frolic on the moon with the Apollo astronauts.

The Grass Dancer is a cornucopia of legends and legacies, secrets and surprises. As one layer of its tale is peeled away, another is revealed, until we are left with a core of understanding of the hopes, dreams, values, and attitudes that inform people and a culture across the generations. Power is a storyteller whose narratives are so vivid that readers are, time and again, shocked when they realize what they have been told is a fictional tale.

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