

Well-Researched and Interesting Story by DM Denton

Review of 'Rebel Puritan' (A Scandalous Life), a novel by Jo Ann Butler

The opening scenes of 'Rebel Puritan' are a powerful reminder of how life teeters on the edge of change. This was even truer for our ancestors, especially those on the lower levels of society who were so dependent on the land, their health, and the stability of each other for survival.

In the first chapters, Ms. Butler engagingly introduces us to Herodias Long at the age of twelve as a headstrong, impulsive, even precocious girl whose childhood ends as her family is dealt a tragic—but not uncommon for the times—blow. Despite her willfulness and resourcefulness, Herod is unwillingly swept from country to city life and into the control of strangers who hardly have the time or inclination to protect her and, in fact, see her more as a commodity than a vital and vulnerable young person.

Then a fateful meeting seems to offer her a chance for escape from servitude, as well as adventure and even some happiness. Of course there are many dangers inherent in desperate choices, and Herod soon realizes that the challenges she faces as an inexperienced and optimistic young woman are as old as new.

Ms. Butler's writing is clear and fluid; her knowledge of the political, religious and superstitious backdrop, physical locations, social mores, and even everyday objects and activities of 17th century England and Colonial America offer a believable and interesting narration. Ms. Butler makes a commendable statement of how strength and vulnerability run parallel, and that women, long before feminism and the encouragement and support for legal redress, could have a strong sense of themselves and their human rights to take a stand against physical and emotional abuse.

The novel was, for me, more moving at the beginning than the end, even though the 'final' events are dramatic I didn't feel their impact and wasn't as invested in the continuation of the heroine's story as I should have been. For me it lacked subjectivity, a lingering on moments (so often a casualty of stories that travel an extended period of time) and deepening of characters especially the main ones. I wanted to feel Herod's enticing beauty more, really get 'inside' her growing from a child into a woman and be more affected by her relationships to her children and with her husband and lover.

Saying that, I enjoyed this novel and recommend it for its well-researched and interesting story, very able writing and important statement about the struggle of and prejudices against women that are, amazingly, still at issue today.