

AFTERWORD

By James Ward Lee

In 1973, when Shelby Hearon published *The Second Dune*, she had been married for twenty years, which gave her a great deal of time to contemplate the life of an educated married woman living as adjunct to husband and children. An honors graduate of the University of Texas, Hearon spent a number of her married years outside the intellectual community she was educated for. She was a mother and wife, a Junior Leaguer, a member of PTA, a volunteer for Planned Parenthood, and a frustrated artist-in-waiting. Finally, in 1968, she published her first novel, *Armadillo in the Grass*, which set her off on a long and successful career as a writer. In that book, she began her exploration of the themes that mark not only *The Second Dune* but almost all the thirteen other novels that Hearon has published since. She is interested in the roles that women play and the disguises they wear to get through life, the relationships between husbands and wives, between mothers and their children, especially their daughters, and the often messy search for a “Prince of a Fellow”—to echo the title of her fifth novel. And always there are questions of appearance versus reality and free will versus determinism.

In *The Second Dune*, what we notice first is the relationship between Ellen, a somewhat frustrated housewife now on her second marriage, and her four-year-old daughter. The little girl, also named Ellen, wants a longer name, so she is always called Ellen Nor. Ellen Marshall hopes her child will grow up knowing that some of the things she herself was taught as a girl and young woman are false. She hopes Ellen Nor will avoid the traps she and many women learned from other women. She says,

Raised by women, schooled by women, we who are mothers now were taught to look across the gulf to men and count ourselves only as they counted us. We learned to take our hearts and wrap them in ribboned boxes to be raffled at socials to the dark one on the right (p.6)

On the same page, she says, “Although we thus learned early to tune our ears to the language of men, it is from female to female that the Word is passed.” But the problem is that too many mothers pass along the wrong Word, which says a young woman’s only meaning in life is to be found in a relationship with a husband. In other words, a girl’s job is to find a “prince” who will take her life in hand and lead her through marriage and motherhood and old age the way Ellen’s father has led her mother. The way Ellen’s brother Edward is dragging “his Laura Ann” from pregnancy and miscarriage to new pregnancies and more miscarriages. Edward needs to found a dynasty, and whether it kills his wife is of secondary concern. Less sinister but no less demeaning is the way John Marshall takes Ellen in hand and tries to re-shape her as the perfect suburban housewife. She had already been shaped once while married to Franklin Hawkins. But she kicked over those traces by having an affair with John Marshall and then leaving Franklin for John.

Ellen didn’t learn her lesson the first time, but there are indications that she is now getting the point and will not stay forever with her second prince. Many things are changing in her life. In the past, she has always spent her birthday at her parents’ house in Galveston, but this year she is not going back to the place where she relived her childhood and adolescence, wandering the dunes and swimming naked in the sea. Metaphorically, it seems, the first dune is her marriage to Franklin; the second is to John. She is living fitfully on the second dune but may be ready to return to the sea from whence she came, a sea where she had her own existence in some kind of geologic time. She says, quoting Einstein, that “time is not a constant thing. It depends on where you stand or whether you are moving toward it or away, a relative thing” (p. 4). And later on the next page—“time runs both ways at once, like the ocean’s tide going out and coming in.” We know—though Ellen may not have figured it out yet—that things have little chance of working out well between her and John. Their life is not *her* life.

Ellen has her own ideas about life, and she is weary of adapting herself to the ways of men. Franklin was controlling in one way, John in another—even though she is not blameless in aiding and abetting them. Now, well along in life, she realizes that what she has learned from her mother's long marriage will not serve her well. Thinking of her parents' lives, she says, "My mother was not the best example of how to be a woman, as, through the years unable to get a response from my father, she mulched and pruned in compensation until she grew herself as dwarfed and mannered as a boxwood hedge." Ellen wants more, and she wants more for little Ellen Nor. What Ellen will ultimately do is not spelled out in the book, but it is pretty clear early in the novel that she is not willing to prune herself into a boxwood hedge or bear a vast family like the one John Marshall's mother provided to her prince. Will she, like the detested and soon to be ex-sister-in-law Velma, leave the Marshall clan? Velma leaves Harold, the preacher, for another man, and what is worse in the Marshall brothers' eyes is that she "didn't even leave his clothes clean or his dishes washed. And it was a Saturday night, the night before church, and he was working on his sermon." (p. 138). As she hears these complaints, Ellen thinks: "not only adultery, but bad maid service. The mind grows faint."

In looking at the failure of marriages, Ellen has examples other than her own to contemplate. Most of the women in the novel have succumbed to marriage or have run away from it. She reflects on her mother, her sisters-in-law Laura Ann and Velma, and her neighbor Karol, who is constantly looking for a prince, but who is always finding a toad—her last princely failure is a furniture salesman with the improbable nickname of Nookie. The women who serve as examples for Ellen are all victims of one female malady or another. The mother as resigned boxwood hedge, Laura as a terrorized mother-never-to-be, and Velma who fails as a maid but succeeds as a runaway. And then Karol, on a pilgrimage from bed to bed. Ellen is smarter than they are. She knows she has to escape, but she won't do it with sex or submission. She has learned how both fail. So

she must face the prospect of striking out on her own. She tells us early in the book about the annual pilgrimage to the sea: “I make an annual trip to watch the world break whole, climbing a new day over the edge of the sea, making me a year older. This pilgrimage to home, to all of my earlier selves, has not varied through two husbands” (p.23). It is at the seashore that “earlier Ellens lie, like surfaced fossils” (p.24). And “There at that water’s edge are many Ellens” (27). It seems clear to me that what we are watching in *The Second Dune* is the shaping of a new and more mature and less dependent Ellen.

Shelby Hearon is often reviewed as a novelist who writes about mothers and daughters, but she is equally astute about mothers and sons. In this novel and in others she proves herself to be a close observer of boys and young men turning into the princes who will steal some girl’s heart and save her from spinsterhood or—worse still—genuine independence. Much of *The Second Dune* is spent looking at Ellen and Franklin’s son Frank, who at the nadir of adolescence is struggling to find his bearings. As John, his stepfather, and Ellen’s brother Edward sit and talk politics,

Frank comes in to join us; he accepts a Sprite on ice, wanting to partake like the men in an after-dinner drink. I’m not sure who he imitates as he slouches down. It must be hard to try everyone’s mannerisms on for size, searching for one that fits. It makes him seem so awkward, that not only is his voice changing, but his style is also, from room to room and audience to audience. It must take men a while to get comfortable with themselves: maybe they never do until they have a profession to put on for cover. (p. 52)

Here the question of disguises is applied to men and boys as well as to the women that Hearon puts in disguises so often. As Yeats says, we all must put on masks to conceal the real faces that we can’t bear to have revealed to the world, or as Eliot says in his famous poem about Prufrock, you must “prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.” And

since things are hardly ever what they seem, it is well to be prepared.

Men in Hearon's novels are never really savaged. They are as much victims of their culture as women are. Someone has trained them too. When Ellen visits John's office to take the box of chocolates to Peggy, the secretary who is leaving John's office because she has fallen in love with him, she muses that Peggy would have treated John better than she did.

She made clear that a man like John—a Student Body President whose silver spurs still serve as bookends in his office—deserved better than he got at home.

The fault was mine: I punished him for being what I most wanted. Married to Franklin, convinced that the confinement of our habits was imposed by him, not able to see that Franklin, accustomed to providing, must have constructed our routine to meet my needs, I had wanted John in my room. To inhabit it, to litter it, to undo my austere and scheduled existence. I had asked the Prince to ride up my glass mountain on his horse, and then withheld the golden oranges. . . . (pp.159-60)

Shelby Hearon does not provide easy answers. True, Ellen should not spend the rest of her life with John, but the fault lies more in the stars than in the smaller spheres of people. It is hard to say what she will do—and when. But things have a way of working out. Franklin, bereft at the loss of Ellen to John, has found Babs, who might be as perfect for him as Peggy might have been for John. And Harold, with the help of the Marshall brothers, may get over Velma, and maybe even Laura Ann will find the courage to escape Edward's tyranny. As Ellen says of Laura Ann's choosing her physician brother, "As was expected of her, she chose from all her suitors a tall, dark knight in a scrub suit. The trouble is that happily-ever-after is a country run by husbands, away from the footlights." But she also notes that "girls who know the right spells to cast can get out of their own towers without waiting for some passing prince" (p.81). And maybe they all will. But to wrap it up neatly is not Hearon's way. She makes the reader help her complete the book And that is what makes *The Second Dune* worth the reading.