

# LAY YOUR SLEEPING HEAD

A HENRY RIOS MYSTERY

Michael Nava

foreword by  
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## FOREWORD

*Lay Your Sleeping Head* is not *The Little Death*. *The Little Death* is a good read and a promising first novel. *Lay Your Sleeping Head* is something most novelists spend a lifetime trying to produce. Selfishly, I'm glad that Michael Nava waited to revisit and rewrite his first novel, because it means I get to read *Lay Your Sleeping Head* for the first time now. I was in my early twenties when I first heard about Nava's work. I'm now in middle age, partially disabled, more familiar with addiction and illness than anyone should be, and far better prepared to appreciate the imperfect humanness of Nava's characters. I'm tempted to read *Lay Your Sleeping Head* in the ways that I approached Nava's work ten or twenty years ago: as a novel about identity, about race, gender, class, disability, and sexuality. As I read the manuscript, though, I begin to see that its core is concerned with something else. Fundamentally, what Nava has gives us in these pages is a forceful meditation on inequality and the value of those lives society considers disposable. It doesn't seem right to call *Lay Your Sleeping Head* "gay fiction" (despite some excellent sex scenes that weren't in the original) or even "detective fiction" (despite a thrilling legal mystery). As a contribution to American letters, this new novel puts me in mind of books like Ann Petry's *The Street*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*.

In some ways, it remains a novel of the 1980s. In other, more important, ways, it is a novel of now, with much to say about the meth epidemic in the gay community, and more unexpectedly perhaps, about the police state that the United States has become in the decades since Reagan's presidency. The spirit of justice that motivates protagonist Henry Rios to take on the system like a queer, brown Bernie Sanders is the spirit that understands how this system is rigged against his clients, especially those whom Chicana feminist Gloria Anzladúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* calls "los atrevesados": "the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-

breed, the halfdead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal.'" Nava's protagonist, Henry Rios, more prosaic than Anzaldúa, might simply call them the marginalized or the downtrodden.

As I write this foreword, the U.S. political establishment is touting the fact that unemployment rate is around five percent, roughly the same as in Britain and down significantly from its peak of 10% in 2010. Yet, the Bureau of Labor Statistics website tells us that the percentage of those between the ages of 16 and 64 in the United States who are "not in the labor force" is 30%, which is twice that of Britain. These are not people who are underemployed, retired, working part time, or looking for work. They are jobless and not seeking jobs. If you add the unemployed to this number, you have *just over a third* of the nation's labor force not working. Yet the economy is growing, and those of us who benefit enjoy organic donuts that practically melt on one's tongue. We wash them down with seasonal craft beers on tap. We "share" the experience with friends across the globe using a cellphone app whose algorithms give it all more critical analysis than we do. But there are shantytowns everywhere today. Our city planners keep them just out of sight so that we don't get indigestion after our donuts and beer. But we know they are there, waiting for us if we fall through the cracks. In addition to the fear, there is anger in the air today. Confrontations between far left and far right youth turn bloody on the streets of Chicago and Sacramento. The police reveal Klan robes under their body armor in Baltimore, Ferguson, and Oakland. So-called "mass shootings" take place on a daily basis across the nation, taking the lives of school children, dancers, and moviegoers.

It is often at moments of extreme inequality and urgent crisis that the noir genre gains in popularity. Dashiell Hammett published *The Maltese Falcon* in 1929 at the dawn of The Great Depression, and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* premiered in 1974 at the height of a global recession. I thus find now an appropriate time to revisit Nava's Henry Rios novels. Noir protagonists often operate outside of and antagonistically toward the official array of

police, courts, and prisons. This positioning helps them see that "the system" is mostly set up to protect the interests of the wealthy and powerful. So our noir heroes and heroines do what the police won't: they confront the criminal cartels, the vast conspiracies, and the unofficial networks that hold the lives of the powerless to be without value. By the very nature of this confrontation, they rarely succeed in bringing the system to its knees. They and their fans must find solace in what partial justice their perseverance enables them to achieve.

The best noir endings thus nearly always leave me feeling melancholy. When grinding inequality and conspiracies of the powerful seem insurmountable, however, witnessing the integrity and commitment to justice of a man like Henry Rios reminds me that I am not alone. I take comfort in knowing that he starts out as a drunk who has never had a romantic relationship. I couldn't stand to have Superman rescue me. He's too good, too clean, too perfect. I need a hero as fucked up as I am. I know Henry wouldn't judge me or pity me. Maybe he could even love me. And it's inspiring to think that even someone as broken and fucked up as Henry can consistently stand up for what he knows is right. To hint at a moment of poignancy in *Lay Your Sleeping Head*, sometimes all we have is footnote four of *United States v. Carolene Products*. In other words, sometimes, when winning seems out of reach, all we have is our ability to resist injustice and the conviction that we do not struggle alone.

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