Clarion Review

General

40 Monroe Street
Steven Farbstein
CreateSpace
978-1-4499-5464-2
Three Stars (out of Five)

People are, by nature, inclined to focus on situations that have had a memorable impact; rarely do we make a big deal of random and sporadic actions, or emphasize repeated, often annoying, behavior unless the consequences are earth-shattering. But a mundane, trivial event can be more interesting than a profound, momentous ordeal in the words of the right storyteller. Commercial authors are trained to create everything with a specific purpose, with an outline prepared in advance of publication. *4*0 Monroe Street* demonstrates that good reasons to write are a matter of definition and that one's life experiences are not always part of a designated plan.

In this typical coming-of-age novel, Steven Farbstein elaborates on the experiences of growing up in New York in a Lower East Side housing project built in 1934. Steeped in hard-hitting realism, the book does not gloss over the disgusting and unpleasant aspects of the narrator's childhood surroundings. Farbstein uses descriptive phrases that evoke the senses and allow the reader to live vicariously through his main character.

One excellent example of his characteristic, attention-grabbing style is the author's description of an overly amorous aunt: "All I knew was that the big wet kiss was inevitable, and I hid whenever Helene was hovering in the area. I didn't want to be tongue kissed by a woman who felt the need to bend down on her knees to reach my mouth."

The anonymous Jewish narrator remembers his past in a series of somewhat haphazard chapters that focus on family, friends, rites, rituals, punishment, and entertainment. He discusses everything from his encounters at summer camp to his episodes at school. Though quite fascinating in places, the book ambles in too many directions without a final destination. This is done, in part, for effect, but Farbstein takes irony to an extreme. His goal may be to transcend time and space in mind-travel. Rather than focusing on one memorable summer or a particularly bad year at school, he enters too many places and brings back too many seasons. The book also

shows minor signs that it was not edited carefully.

No information is available on Steven Farbstein, and it's not clear whether this memoir-style novel is based on events in his life. Reading his work is like encountering entries in a raunchy, confidential diary. Even those who may at first resist dipping into these private, often humorous reflections will find the stories engrossing.

Julia Ann Charpentier