FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

General

Blue Paradise
Matt Bloom
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Central character Nick Gallagher is an aspiring boxer who tends bar at the Blue Paradise, located in the unfashionable district of Manhattan known as Hell's Kitchen. Author Matt Bloom, a former boxer and bartender himself, not surprisingly establishes the novel's settings with deft economy and precision and provides their habitues with persuasively cadenced and inflected dialogues.

It must be said that Bloom needs these specificities of setting, tone and temper to counterbalance a narrative so otherwise heavily freighted with stereotypes and cliches. Nick is a boxer, so there must be a Mephistophelean bookie at hand to tempt him. On the other hand, there's Nick's mentor and conscience, his Uncle John, now wheelchair bound after one fight too many, whose best advice is, "You gotta do what you gotta do, Nicholas." And this being a barroom novel, there has to be a bunch of regulars, losers all, who gather nightly to badger and berate each other. And so there are.

It takes a certain courage to attempt a refashioning of such familiar material. And it takes talent to conjure in the reader a sympathetic interest. Bloom does that, not least through the agency of Nick's unlikely friend Jerry, the all-night attendant at a van rental lot out on the West Side Highway. Jerry is so deeply and irredeemably wounded, so utterly inconsolable, so inevitably luckless, that one cannot help but be fascinated and appalled by his degrading misadventures.

Blue Paradise delivers solid, workmanlike prose coupled with precise, persuasive observation. Bloom has the confidence to represent this world as he knows it, without attempting to disguise its essential banality. The lives of the desperate, this novel suggests, are imitation lives in which only the pain is real.

Nick Bozanic