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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ GENERAL FICTION

Cats in a Chowder

Fred j Schneider
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The Sisler family from Fred J. Schneider's new novel *Cats In A Chowder* is a working man's all-American dirt-under-the-nails version of J.D. Salinger's Glass family. The Glass family—from Salinger's novel *Franny and Zooey* and his book of short stories *Nine Stories*—is made up of intellectually precocious prodigies while the Sisler family in *Cats In a Chowder* is more proficient at America's favorite past-time baseball.

Cats In A Chowder begins with main character Robin Sisler's thoughts and memories of being 'baptized' at one week old by Harry his father. Harry drapes little Robin in an old baseball jersey in the hopes of fulfilling a Sisler family prophecy of producing a great player for the New York Mets. But Harry isn't the only family member with ambitions for the young son. Agatha Robin's religiously obsessed mother desperately wanted her son to enter into the priesthood:

Agatha believed that I Robin Sisler would be the prodigal priest the one prophesized for generations over greasy Easter leg-of-lamb dinner. "God's put his mark on him" she declared omitting as understood that placing a son in the priesthood represented the highest Catholic family achievement this side of a job with health benefits.

While his parents are at odds about his future Robin and his friend Cooney decide to buck all the systems and become writers turning *Cats In A Chowder* into a coming of age road-trip through the socially and politically turbulent late sixties and early seventies.

Currently author Fred J. Schneider is an essayist for Public Radio but during his college years he was an ardent supporter of the activists Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin. Obviously his radical experiences greatly influence the novel.

But it's Schneider's way with words that add levity and zest to the tired and old-hat Freudian analysis of adolescent guilt and angst. And in place of the over-used association of hallucinations and psychedelics Robin's guilt manifests itself hilariously through nighttime visitations from inquiring pop culture characters: they all want to know about a pet Molly fish that had been flushed down the toilet. Schneider writes "When while sitting on your toilet a vindictive tropical fish bites you…it's easy to assume things can't get much worse but…Albert Einstein visited me first. He studied me like a scientific anomaly like a quark… 'So" he asked with his Germanic accent "What's with the fish?'"

Throughout the novel Schneider has inserted the expression "How deep yet meaningless." It's a conclusion that helps Robin debunk pop philosophical ponderings as nothing more than navel gazing. *Cats In A Chowder* is a metaphor for the death of the dream of the idea of even having an American Dream: baseball mothers road trips and the Chicago Seven all get the straight shot to the pocket. But for all his sarcasm Schneider has enough of his idealism intact to share a laugh at humanity's absurdity while spinning an excellent yarn.

LEE GOODEN (October 2, 2006)

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