

Eddie & Bella

Wayne Wilson

Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill (Jan 5, 2001)

\$21.95 (304pp)

978-1-56512-297-0

The best barometer to appreciating the long, strange road trip of Eddie & Bella may be gauged from its wake of patchouli oil that is Bella's oft-remarked signature scent. (Eddie's bottled essence would mix unleaded gasoline, dope, and sweat with an herbal tea stain on his copy of Rilke's poems.)

Readers who still savor the earthy head-shop memory-musk of patchouli will delight in this picaresque love story of two aging hipsters who spend some twenty years avoiding the consequences of their youthful fling. Those who have dutifully traded up to more synthetic, complex perfumes of ready (if cheap) cynicism will just have to be patient, for Wilson hijacks the reader, puts him in a dilapidated car and takes him on a low-rent tour of art and love, from Boston to California, Texas to New Orleans to New York. A sentimental satire, replete with the dizzying detritus of popular culture, Eddie & Bella's episodic, flashback plot frequently grinds its gears and threatens to run out of gas, giving the author license to riff on any number of characters that in films would be sight gags and sidekicks: the needy, nerdy human resources manager in Boston who falls for Bella's productivity; the jive-talking Vietnam vet insurance adjuster who mocks Eddie's income; Bella's ex-lover, now an earnest Buddhist cabinet-maker; Bella's preternaturally hardy daughters, each grimly turning a gypsy childhood spent in the back of her car into a career ethos.

Though it's hard to give credence to Eddie being quite the instinctive Romeo that he's credited with in his circle of conquests, Bella's counterweight sarcasm creates a particular chemistry; a born-again feminist, Wilson gives Bella all the best lines. Gray-haired, rueful, and still callow, Eddie, at the novel's end, offers his trump line: "Maturity means trusting your romantic impulses." No, it doesn't, Bella replies, but she offers to share with him her last packet of Sno Balls. She is kindness itself, for another woman might have thrown it at him. Still, as they sit on a Boston roof, hearing the television blare its "trumpet of a love-sick elephant," one wishes them well, and thanks for the memories.

Wilson, a teacher of fiction at the Harvard Extension School and author of the 1990 novel *Loose Jam*, has given a new twist to the comic novel of love.

LEETA TAYLOR (January / February 2001)

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