



## Clarion Review

Short Stories

### **Epic Sloth: Tales of the Long Crawl**

Philip Gaber

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Three Stars (out of Five)

Turns of phrase and hints of unique characters will linger in the mind after reading this unusually compelling collection of fragmented short stories.

Sitting down with Philip Gaber's *Epic Sloth: Tales of the Long Crawl* can be a pleasant experience, with observations that are both witty and provoking. The volume—a random collection of fragments of fiction interspersed with short, unstructured poems—contains some material that is innovative, but inconsistent.

*Epic Sloth* consists of short pieces, many of which seem unfinished. There is a two-page scene of a man standing outside an unemployment agency, smoking a cigar and drinking water. A woman comes up, lights a cigarette, and the two have a mundane, meaningless conversation. In the end, the woman enters the unemployment office and the man lights another cigar. “It’ll be alright, he thinks ... It’ll be alright.” The passage actually says a lot about the two people in a minimalist way. The scene is adroitly written and but the story feels incomplete.

In the midst of this disparate assortment is a particularly interesting piece titled “the bubble dancer.” This is the story of Anton, the owner and chef of a fish restaurant, as seen from the perspective of a young man experienced at odd jobs. Anton has a darker side to him, which is not unusual for kitchen staff in restaurants. In the end, the past intrudes on the present, the restaurant closes, but youth triumphs: “And I discovered the joys of unemployment insurance.” Gaber has a gift for packing a lot of story into very few sentences and “the bubble dancer” may be the best example of this talent in this book.

Gaber's poetry is, like his prose, unconventional. Gaber doesn't use capitalization much. The piece “a revolutionary sense of truth” has a title that overwhelms the poem, which reads, in its entirety: “The tender old man / so frail in the midnight moon / waits for a new day.”

There are a few things that occur repetitively throughout the book: an inability of the narrator to look at himself in a mirror; drugs; booze; the hopelessness of existence; and unhappy, truncated relationships. The author's world is not a light, happy place but his sardonic wit carries him along.

The presentation of *Epic Sloth* matches the overall content of the book. It is stark and ambivalent. There is little artwork on the front cover and none on the back. There is also no publisher listed. The paragraph titled "About the Author" at the end of the collection is short and uninformative.

In the end, however, there is something irresistibly compelling about *Epic Sloth*. Gaber is a talented and imaginative writer who remains positive while confronting life with all of its tension and ugliness on full display. Long after reading these stories and bits of stories, a thought or sentence or character of his will glow in the mind and linger there like a dim candle.

*John Senger*