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Erased

Jim Krusoe
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Oscar Wilde said, “All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.” He might have been describing the strange adventures of Theodore Bellefontaine, the owner of a mail-order business who searches for his deceased mother in the transformed landscape of Cleveland, Ohio. At once hilarious and moving, *Erased* is the story of a son’s sustained love for an unreliable parent in an increasingly bizarre world of lady bikers, brawling philanthropists, and sport fishermen.

Poor Theodore. His mother Helen is unapologetic about a twenty-year absence, and her relationship with her son is more formal than misty-eyed. When she disappears a second time, Theodore is not surprised—until she is declared dead by a Cleveland newspaper. Postcards, signed by Helen, begin to arrive in Theodore’s mailbox. He leaves his business and goes to Cleveland to find his mother, whom he believes is still alive.

Cleveland itself is a fantastically reimagined city, an Oz of culture and art. The citizens are “tanned and confident individuals” who “searched the crowd in the secure knowledge that somewhere out there, in some bar or library or mosh pit, there was a person just as smart and confident and good-looking as they were.” Theodore begins his search with the belief that finding his mother is just a matter of time. Instead, he drifts through Cleveland’s underworld, which glitters with life. In comparison, Theodore—who vacillates between gullible and fairly stupid—is a dull dolt who brings humor to a story that would otherwise be very dark. Krusoe, author of the acclaimed *Girl Factory* and two short story collections, strikes a deft balance between humor and solemnity.

Sometimes overwhelming in detail, *Erased* errs on the weird side. Readers familiar with Tin House’s other publications will be right at home, but novices may feel as lost as Theodore following the trail of Helen’s postcards. Interspersed between the chapters are fictional interviews on the nature of death and the afterlife, which add thematic depth to the main storyline. The result is dizzying, thrilling—a welcome challenge for a reader in search of something fresh. *Erased* will appeal to fans who enjoy fiction that travels off the beaten path, such as the novels of Peter Rock and Aimee Bender. For those brave enough to look below the surface, the rewards of *Erased* are rich indeed.
CLAIRE RUDY FOSTER (July / August 2010)

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