

Fogtown

Peter Plate

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The San Francisco in the pages of this slender, rough-around-the-edges novel is not the town of Tony Bennett's signature song. There's no romance, no tiny cable cars, and if there are any hearts, they have been bludgeoned by drugs, alcohol, and poverty.

Covering one day in the lives of several marginalized characters-Mama Celeste, an unemployed widow who talks to God; Stiv Wilkins, a failure at everything he tries, be it dealing drugs or singing in a band; Richard Rood, a menacing African-American gay hustler; and Jeeter Roche, the well-read drug dealer and landlord of the Allen, a seedy snake pit of a residential hotel-the story is threaded from the very beginning by a car accident. Outside the Social Security office, a drunk driver careens into a Brinks armored car, liberating several millions of dollars.

Naturally, the money disappears within minutes and manages to affect each of the characters in ways big and small. Mama Celeste, for example, helps herself to a few million dollars. Instead of buying a hot meal or paying her rent at the Allen, she wanders Market Street, dripping hundred-dollar bills from the shoebox in which she has stashed the cash. She gives \$1,000 to Richard Rood, unknowingly indenturing the man to her. In the meantime, Rood searches for Stiv, who also needs to pay his Allen Hotel rent as well as come up with \$400 in drug money he owes Rood.

Stiv is not the brightest bulb in the box. Rather than look for a job to support his new wife and infant son, he floats through the day trying on petty crimes for size. The novel takes on magical realism in the form of Stiv's "hallucinations" of a nineteenth-century Mexican bandit who haunts the halls of the Allen, an apparition Stiv could bypass with psychotropic drugs if it weren't for the side effects he suffers. In the meantime, Jeeter Roche the landlord counts his money, reads Jorge Amado's *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon*, and terrorizes his tenants for the rent, plotting despicable tactics for getting them to pay up.

The author has published seven novels, including *One Foot Off the Gutter* and *Snitch Factory*; he taught himself to write fiction while squatting in abandoned buildings. A master of the omniscient form, he makes his narrative float seamlessly among the characters. The danger in this form, of course, is that all of the characters might sound the same or possess similar thoughts, but for these members of the Welfare Nation, everyone is living the same nightmare, in which they are only concerned with one thing-surviving another day.

OLIVIA BOLER (September / October 2004)

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