

Henry First: A Story of Excess

Basil Lawrence

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Laced with potent dark humor, this entertaining yet often disturbing novel crosses the fine line drawn between satire and realism.

Fine cuisine and morbid excess create an exquisite word parfait in this sardonic look at the competitive world of gourmet cooking. In this complex recipe for literary success, Basil Lawrence steeps myriad ingredients in a broth so rich that *Henry First* may require a second reading for hidden nuance.

Henry First is a chef and restaurateur. This well-drawn protagonist agonizes over every detail of his business and suffers through accidents and mishaps, or what some might simply call a streak of bad luck. On a precarious financial edge and reliant on the skills of others as well as his own ingenuity, Henry values awards and acclaim just like any struggling entrepreneur.

This in-depth novel is hardly based on mere competition, however, for lurking in its complex structure is a life-or-death punch delivered in the most unusual way. A secondary character, Henry's cancer-stricken brother-in-law, forms a somber foundation. Yet a lighthearted tone makes this highly intellectual book nearly impossible to categorize. Buried within the work are countless messages and ambiguous situations subject to interpretation. If Lawrence set out to incite critical analysis of culinary attitudes often taken for granted, he succeeded.

A decided obsession with the bloody procedures involved in preparing meat manifests itself from the first chapter. Barbaric, perhaps even pagan, the literal hacking into flesh and bone casts a gray sheen over an industry that still very much caters to carnivores. Without passing judgment, Lawrence explores techniques and lifestyles of those driven to succeed in a high-ranking kitchen. Henry's thoughts reveal an inner comedian combating the urge to quit:

When he emerged from the rear of the building he found himself thinking about the hospital basement—a quick drop to the mortuary where he'd be free to lop off bits of flesh, hack at stiffened digits without fear of causing pain. He could plop them into the bag, wipe the fluid from his blade and wrap it in cloth like a professional.

A candid glimpse of interpersonal relationships—brainstorming and undermining, healing and fighting, living and dying—humanizes this frankly touching and frequently funny story. The backdrop is an incredible capitalistic endeavor, and waiting in the wings are numerous saboteurs. Potentially lucrative but typically risky, the art of fine cooking is a catalyst that brings out the best and worst in human behavior.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (December 15, 2014)

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