Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

Napoleon's Penis: Plus Other Engaging and Outrageous Tales
Stanley Bierman
Trafford
978-1-4669-5983-5
Three Stars (out of Five)

The charming and, at times, hilarious preface and opening chapters aside, Dr. Stanley M. Bierman's *Napoleon's Penis* does not quite live up to the promise of its title and subtitle. A collection of thirty-seven essays culled from a newsletter he sent to patients and friends between 1987 and 2000, parts of the book are dated or read like one of those letters people send out in their holiday greetings to update friends and relatives on their family's progress over the previous year.

There are some gems. "Death and Fanny's Red Dress" is lovely and sweet. "The Man with the Golden Penis" is creepy and unsettling yet, like the lure of a freak show, hard to resist. "Yiddish as a Second Language" is a must for any goy who can't tell a mensch from a meshuga, and anyone familiar with the late comic Phil Silvers (of classic TV's Sgt. Bilko fame) will surely get a smile after reading "Strangers in an Elevator."

Yet, sadly, for all of these delightful treasures there is also much dross. The selections on Bierman's vacations abroad are the stuff of dull travelogues—with the exception of the one about his trip to Israel and an encounter with a Bedouin healer. Anyone who has been to or dreams of going to Australia, New Zealand, Egypt, Jordan, Brazil, Argentina, England, Holland, or any of the other countries the Biermans have visited will find those sections of interest. However, most readers are unlikely to be inspired by or gain any insight into the cultures of those places from his whirlwind reports.

Bierman's essays on social issues are rather predictable little asides that are neither controversial nor inspired. Bierman is a good, honest, forthright fellow with an open mind and loving heart, and while his essays on love, racism, homosexuality, and other issues for the most part reflect that, they do not add anything unique to the national dialogue on these topics.

The doctor is a good wordsmith, and one who at times gives evidence of a spark of

brilliance. The opening essay, “The Peripatetic Posthumous Peregrination of Napoleon’s Penis,” is an example (if an outrageous one) of such talent, as is “Dear Mom and Dad: The Nightmarish Letter to Home,” though the letter in question was written by Bierman’s son Robert, and so he perhaps deserves the lion’s share of praise for this one.

About half of the thirty-seven short essays in the book are interesting and, in some cases, even delightful. A few are unpleasant and unsettling, as should be expected in what are essentially the memoirs of a doctor who specialized in treating sexually transmitted diseases. Unfortunately, many of the pieces are dull. Best read in snippets, Bierman’s book may help many readers pass the time—some will be quite interested though likely not terribly compelled by *Napoleon’s Penis*.

Mark McLaughlin