General

North of Patagonia
Johnny Payne
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A tattered copy of an old

Argentine cowboy fable of dusty death gives this lively novel its borrowed title, but its code of male fighting honor has a vernacular homeboy sound. This code is very much at home in both Chicago's rich mansions and Lexington, Kentucky's harness racing high (and down-and-out) society.

The book features a macho friendship and survival pact between Balboa Trafalgar, a black chiropractor in Hyde Park with a thriving extramarital life, and Clay Justin, a white ex-Golden Gloves sparring partner whose bruises have as much to do with his heart-wounding ex-wife and daughter in Lexington as they do with the ring. The pair's picaresque trials have all the earnest, earthy energetic sprawl of friendly kudzu. Its topiary form is tamed by a nicely balanced comedy with the domestic reality of the women's worlds.

The author has an endearing eye for those lost lonesome details of Lexington, high society horse country and Hooftown, the shanty rooms downtown where those down on their luck migrate. Readers might need a scorecard to keep the romantic, financial, and professional vendettas separate, as well as the wives and mistresses who figure into the line-up.

North of Patagonia has no chapter breaks; instead there are cross-referenced points of view and a novel-within-a-novel section in which Clay's ex-wife channels her own erotic frustration into a roman Ã clef featuring a man named Clay. There is even a ridiculous homework skit for Clay's daughter that proves Clay is descended from Thomas Jefferson through the children of his black slave Sally Hemmings.

The author is an associate professor in the English Department at Florida Atlantic University and director of its creative writing program, and has three other works of fiction to his credit. In this one, he has deftly mixed voices and streams of consciousness. By the time the last bruising blows are taken in the boxing ring, the reader may be in danger of liking these two

main characters almost as much as their creator does.

Leeta Taylor