Clarion Review

General

Norton's Lament
Alden E.C. Bigelow
BookSurge
978-1-4515-8400-4
Four Stars (out of Five)

Alden E. C. Bigelow's *Norton's Lament* is a provocative novel with a misleading title, if one is to define "lament" as an expression of deep sorrow, a wailing or mourning. Bigelow tells the story of Joe Norton—dropping out of college, joining the Navy and beginning to deal with life. It is the tale of a man being stalked by serious depression; but there is little regret. Rather, Norton battles a debilitating disease with sensitivity and courage.

Joe Norton is acutely aware of his underlying demonic depression, one that often gets the better of him and destroys his self-confidence and sense of self-worth. Bigelow thoroughly explains how Norton terminates his relationship with Melbourne, his soul mate, so as not to burden her with his depression. Norton says, regarding his coming fight with depression: "And I don't want you with me for that. If there's one thing I can do, it's to protect your life against the destruction I see before me. I won't let it bring you down, too. It's the one good thing I can do out of all this." It is reminiscent of Bogart and Bergman in that great climactic scene in Casablanca.

Bigelow is at his best, however, describing the months Norton spent in the Navy. His recount of how the depression drove Norton to difficult and often dangerous situations is intense and emotionally charged. It is the most consistent and authentic description of the main character's feelings, and of his developing understanding of the burden he carries. While Norton realizes depression dominated his life and prevented him from creating lasting relationships, Norton's response to his demons also gave him an unusual protective assurance. He notes: "…I felt alive, keenly sensing all the undercurrent of fear and loathing, but also the sharp laughter and irony which is life, however deprived, depraved or even denied. It was better than the living death of the black-ass depression, or so I thought."

It is an odd retelling as there are great chunks of the story missing. *Norton's Lament*

primarily covers the years in Norton's life from 1964 through 1967. Eventually, in 1996, Norton comes to grips with his demons while living alone in a dilapidated cabin in the hills of Virginia. Without more details of these intervening years, the story is out of balance. What happened in those years that contributed to the ultimate conclusion?

Although the last chapters of this novel are a rush to an almost Hollywood ending, Bigelow has written a believable account of one person's struggle with debilitating depression. Bigelow casts Norton as an outstanding person and makes *Norton's Lament* not a lament but an insightful experience.

John Michael Senger