

★ **Pay as You Go****Eskor David Johnson**

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In Eskor David Johnson's thrilling literary novel *Pay as You Go*, a barber careens through an imaginary metropolis in search of a place to call home.

Two months after moving to sprawling Polis, Slide shares an apartment with an agoraphobic giant and a man who's lost weight and keeps forty-seven lamps burning day and night. He still hasn't been outside of his hellish, drought-stricken neighborhood. But when a date gone wrong sends Slide searching for a new apartment ("not just any somewhere to eat sleep defecate and wait for the Reaper in a grim carousel of repeating days, mind you, but to *live*"), he discovers that the city is ready to gobble him up and spit him out for insurance money. The subways are closed for construction, the buses are melting, and teenage gangsters talk in bird calls outside.

Propelled by charismatic, tongue-twisting prose, the novel rides insane waves through characters, encounters, and strange cityscapes. A flood is caused by "a herd of lost clouds...too heavy to go anywhere after drinking from the ocean"; hotel doormen conspire to make Slide pee himself; and when Slide sees a fresh batch of immigrants arriving in Polis, he shouts, "Don't even bother! ...It's a fucking conspiracy! Save your money, go somewhere else, invest in stocks or something."

Both lampooning city life and confessing love for it, this story is a display of prodigious storytelling talent. It rushes by with the creative adrenaline of a one-man show; it hums with an infectious joy. And Slide is a memorable narrator, both slippery and ingenuous, whose odyssey through the bowels of city life is poignant, funny, and riveting.

Told in a raucous vaudeville style that blends gorgeous lyrical descriptions with madcap farce, *Pay as You Go* is a magnetic novel.

WILLEM MARX (September / October 2023)

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