FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

General

Smallfish Clover: A Boy, A Map, A River, A Bicycle, A Bomb
Heather Shaw
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Man-eating anacondas! Pilfered gold and precious jewels! Such elements fuel the seductively fertile fantasy life young Walter Pace Clover III invents for himself as a means of combating the boredom of accompanying his parents on a business trip to an unnamed South American city. It stands him in good stead when a routine shopping trip to the city's busy street market turns unexpectedly ominous. Playing a surreptitious cat-and-mouse spy game as he wanders the vendors' stalls, Pace and his father become irrevocably separated, and Pace's fecund imagination kicks into overdrive. Like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole, this time Pace is well and truly lost, and will need all his creative powers of invention if he is to survive the ordeal.

"*This is not*, he said to himself, *this is not…* But he couldn't think of how to finish the thought because everything was so far out of the ordinary and expected that not only was there no ending, but there was no beginning either," the author writes. Thus begins Pace's picaresque journey back to his home and family, one in which he encounters swashbuckling villains, beautiful damsels, devilish fiends, and shapeshifting saviors.

It all starts at the end of Pace's first night alone in unfamiliar surroundings when he wakes to find himself in the midst of a tribe of other lost boys, street urchins, and vagabonds under the thrall of a Svengali-like giant named Mabeareek, who coerces the children into panhandling and performing impromptu, often violent, bits of street theater to earn money. Having attracted the unwanted attention of a rival street gang, however, Mabeareek guides his wards out of the city and into remote jungle villages, eventually making their way to the Amazon where a boat will lead them out to sea and northward to salvation.

Shaw has previously written for *Rolling Stone* and *US Weekly*. With its roots in the deepest part of civilization's need for folktales and fables, her inventive debut novel remains ever true to the fantasy genre, conjuring as it does a rich panoply of vivid images (singing

forests, pink polka-dotted toadstools) while creating an enchanting, if menacing, land where Pace overcomes obstacles, devises strategies for survival, and confronts the best and worst his culture has to offer. “For, he concluded, the forgiving world of birthdays and soccer practice that he … had grown up in was a lie. The real world was … a savage battle of the strong against the weak.”

Though her rushed conclusion falls flat compared to the vibrancy of everything that precedes it, Shaw nevertheless limns a perilous journey through an alternative universe where her sympathetic hero communicates and questions society’s principles, some outmoded, some essential. In so doing, Shaw deftly evokes the wonder of an ordinary individual’s ability to affect changes beyond his wildest dreams.

Carol Haggas