



## The Blue Hippopotamus: A Semi-Autobiographical Novel as Told by Earle Porlock, AKA Paul Ehrlich

**Paul Ehrlich**

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Paul Ehrlich describes his new book, *The Blue Hippopotamus*, as a semi-autobiographical novel, and readers will be left wondering which parts are real and which are embellished. Ehrlich's attempt to make "some incidents even better than they were the first time" obviously succeeds, as most of his story is a guessing game. Readers will ask themselves, "Did that really happen? *Could* that really have happened?" Either way, it is wonderful to believe that all of his tales might be true, even if there is a sense that the author himself is slyly winking in the background.

The first parts of *The Blue Hippopotamus* do not involve the hippopotamus at all; that story comes at the very end of the book. Even so, the earlier chapters are the real page-turners. Ehrlich himself appears as the main character, Earle Porlock, a young American Marine recruit who is pulled out of basic training to join an elite Special Forces team on a secret assignment in Europe. The time is early 1942, and Porlock and four others are tasked with rescuing a very important but unidentified man from a German prison camp. Their mission is so top secret that even the Marines hardly seem to know about it, and Ehrlich claims that now, some seventy years after the fact, is the first time the story is being told. Whether it is truth or fiction hardly matters. The story is a fun and intriguing romp, the mission is ultimately successful (and then some), and Porlock, or rather, Ehrlich, lives to tell about it, even if from the perspective of the ninety-year-old, only-surviving member of the team.

The book also includes a heartwarming but devastating love story involving Porlock and a young German girl. Their very short time together becomes the "magic moment" that remains with both of them through the rest of their lives. The two meet again in 1949, once more twenty-five years later, and one last time when he is eighty-two and she seventy-eight, by which time "all the old excitement had been smoothed over." Theirs is a classic tale of heartbreak, and Ehrlich weaves it among all the other stories he presents, both keeping their star-crossed love alive and illustrating how strong that love actually is.

By the time Ehrlich reaches his account of the blue hippopotamus, that particular adventure seems almost anti-climatic. Home from his adventures in Europe, Porlock himself admits the same feeling: "I've already had my last great adventure," he says. "Any further adventure would be more icing on a cake that already has the right amount of icing." While charming and rather unusual, the blue hippopotamus intrigue does not hold a candle to the earlier portions of the book. The reappearance of previous characters and the continuation of the love story are what keep readers involved.

With only a few minor typographical and punctuation errors, *The Blue Hippopotamus* is a delightful and easy read. Ehrlich exhibits a droll sense of humor throughout his book, and he never gives away how much is real and how much invention. Apparently, there is no one else left to relate his stories firsthand, so kudos to Ehrlich for telling them his way. No one will be the wiser.

CHERYL HIBBARD (November 7, 2012)

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