FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

General

The Boy In The Box
Lee J. Nelson
Bridge Works Publishing
978-1-882593-66-8
(January 25, 2003)

Like Kafka's *The Trial* or Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*, this novel is a deceptively straightforward puzzler that yields no certain solution. Smith, the single-name protagonist, is so ordinary in behavior and aspirations that it only gradually becomes apparent that something is seriously amiss in his life. But what? Does this disorder arise from a kink within his own mind, or has he stumbled into an out-of-kilter world with its own strange standards of reality?

The outline of the story, at least, is clear. Smith arrives in New York to interview for a job. He moves into his sister's apartment—she is out of town—and immediately encounters the building's janitor, an elderly man who seems obsessed with telling him something of great importance. The janitor, however, speaks little English. As well as Smith can understand, a young boy has been kidnapped and is imprisoned naked somewhere in a box. Smith spends the remainder of the story on an increasingly frustrating quest to glean details that will lead him to the boy—if there is one.

The author, who teaches English at the City University of New York and has contributed to two books of short stories, tells his tale with such disarming simplicity that each scene—and Smith's reaction to it—seems perfectly plausible. It is only as they unroll in sequence that they become disorienting. As absorbing as the narrative itself are Smith's ruminations as he emerges from each new encounter.

Once persuaded that there is a missing boy, Smith can focus on little else: "As he passed a bagel shop, a poster in the window caught his eye. It introduced an organization, 'Find The Children,' and showed the picture of a handsome boy named Timothy Brown, aged four. Beneath the photo were listed his height, weight, hair, eye color; the date, time and place he had last been seen; an appeal for information. Without a pen or pencil to write down the toll-free telephone number, he would have to return later to copy it down."

Is Smith living his quest or dreaming it—and, ultimately, does it matter which?