



The Pinch

Steve Stern

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Crafted to blur the boundaries between what's real and what's not, this fascinating tale depicts a fanciful past that's both weird and enchanting.

Traveling to a foreign land can be both enchanting and overwhelming, as is Steve Stern's latest foray into the madcap yet melancholy Memphis neighborhood he introduced in his award-winning short-story collection, *The Book of Mischief*. Stern welcomes readers back to the eccentric Jewish quarter of North Main Street through the doors of Avrom Slutsky's dust-laden bookstore, The Book Asylum, where a young Lenny Sklarew uncovers a lavishly illustrated history of the community. Not so strange, except that Lenny finds his own name inexplicably staring back at him from its later pages. As Lenny gets drawn ever deeper into the fanciful past, where rabbis perform magic tricks and massive flooding unleashes an unexpected good cheer amongst the usually curmudgeonly residents, he uncovers more uncanny parallels with his own life.

Stern plays with the boundaries between truth and fiction throughout, even designating the book as both a novel and a history in its subtitle. Lenny's 1968 life in the nearly abandoned buildings of North Main Street is grim and realistic, featuring drug deals and barroom brawls. The life of his 1952 alter ego, Muni, on the other hand, is a virtual circus, complete with a tightrope-walking girl named Jenny, who steals Muni's heart. Stern liberally sprinkles both settings with Yiddish words and phrases that flow naturally from his pen, which heightens the realism.

As the chaos threatens to spin out of control in both tales, self-effacing humor keeps the players humble. Lenny, for instance, is given to introducing himself to women with the most inappropriate phrases, a tactic that gives him the satisfaction of knowing in advance why he'll be rejected. The earnest young Muni, meanwhile, is chagrined to discover that his transformational tree-top encounter with Jenny is not, in fact, the cause of the earthquake that shakes his Memphis neighborhood to its bones. Both characters are believable, and because they accept the craziness going on around them, we can too.

SHEILA M. TRASK (Summer 2015)

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