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Fish, Soap and Bonds

Larry Fondation

Raw Dog Screaming Press (\$13.95 U.S.)

review by Jeff Bursey

A novel featuring three fairly articulate and mostly non-threatening homeless people could go either of two obvious ways: gross sentimentalizing, with a sorrowful death that redeems the characters; or realism filled with grimness and misery. *Fish, Soap and Bonds* avoids going either way because Larry Fondation knows how to depict lives in Los Angeles in 1994 in chapters that can be vignettes, sociologically-minded (on rabies, soup, OJ Simpson, earthquakes) or that further the plot. The prose is focused and nicely tuned to nuance.

As an example, take this line from "Liminal": "Fish and Soap and Bonds are throwing sticks to a stray dog that has joined them temporarily." This sentence, one of eight that comprise the chapter, depicts a common action. For these characters it's a significant pleasure in a life containing beatings, hunger, illness and constant begging. Does reading this sentence wake us to the fact that it's civilized, one might say, to play with a dog? What's more, the dog "is having fun" with two stray men (Fish and Bonds) and Fish's girlfriend Soap, and is essentially equated with them. That's the egalitarianism of the poor and dispossessed. We rescue stray dogs, tidy them up, give them food and love. Homeless people we'd rather neuter or spay, if we can't ignore them, but generally we call someone to move them on.

A severe illness, losing a job or a failed marriage, could force us to liquidate possessions, move to a rough neighborhood, borrow from friends and family and frequent soup kitchens. Fondation doesn't get much into how his creations landed where they are. When this or that character retails the story of coming untethered from the world we're still in, the listeners hear it with mostly good-natured fatigue. They attempt, fitfully, to rise above where they are, without illusions that they'll return to where they once were. Trying to find employment is, as Fish finds out, often a "swing-and-a-miss." They manage to eat well while raising funds for a television station, due to one man's sensitivity. Such charity is rare; indeed, it's most commonly shown them by the Hispanic community. New immigrants and the homeless, Fondation implies, have an awareness of each other's station, and a respect based on commonality. Fish, Soap and Bonds have faults - drunkenness, quick tempers and occasional petty thieving - that want and desperation have brought out in their natures. They're not saints and they're not hopeless. They are like us. The narrative is admirably evenhanded about them, neither glossing over their negative qualities nor passing judgement.

In the last stretch of *Fish, Soap and Bonds* the characters find themselves in Hollywood. The narrator knowingly comments on a "plan to build a permanent home for the Academy Awards. A permanent home," he repeats. Not something these three will likely know again. Their final home is a novel that is sharp, economical, humane, and capacious.

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