

“Brief Reviews”

Firmin: Adventures of a Metropolitan Lowlife

Sam Savage

Illustrated by Michael Mikolowski

Coffee House Press

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by Jeff Bursey

Some of the early lines are incredibly rich, but most simply secure a reader’s attention. “I had always imagined that my life story, if and when I wrote it,” begins Fermin, “would have a great first line...” It doesn’t, but that fits in with the nature of the narrator, and from beginning to end the tonal control is, for the most part, consistent in Sam Savage’s debut novel.

By his own admission, Firmin can be vicious, a dreamer, cynical, depressing. Physically, he’s not that attractive either, “short, thick-waisted, hairy, and chinless... And I thought the dark bulging eyes gave me a revolting froglike air. It was, in short, a shifty, dishonest face, untrustworthy, the face of a really low character.” He wants to be seen differently, looking like “Fred Astaire: thin waist, long legs, and a chin like the toe of a boot.” This self-assessment, coupled with a raging and often frustrated imagination, comes partly through having imbibed literature at his mother’s breast, and from watching movies (and pornography after hours) at the 24-hour Rialto cinema situated in a scruffy corner of Boston.

Savage has managed to create a meringue out of what would be considered squalid or tired material. In the 1960s, Boston underwent urban renewal, and this novel is in part a fond good-bye to long-vanished Scollay Square, which Firmin calls home. More specifically, home is in Pembroke Books, a popular used bookstore. “Like an idiot, I had aspirations,” he confesses. From his perch, he looks out at the rapidly changing street scene, and when he ventures to go out, often he comes across his no-account siblings “running from the Man.” Mostly he finds night conducive to forays into the Rialto, a second Temple for him, where lovely ladies do various things after midnight, and no one bothers him as he munches popcorn or a hot dog.

Firmin gathers impressions of the world from novels, history books, and maps. He has a lot of knowledge which, because of his position, will never be put to use. He fails at sign language, learned from a slender pamphlet, the only time he gets to try it, and typing is impossible for him. He can play the piano, but this never helps him pick up girls. He prefers devouring books to anything else. An insatiable reader, he categorizes authors. In fiction, there are the Big Ones, like Joyce, Dostoyevsky, and Strindberg, from whom Firmin learns that “no matter how small you are, your madness can be as big as anyone’s.”

Firmin’s situation is complex, bizarre, and at times unutterably sad, due to his exceptional condition. He is a rat who was raised with literature for sustenance, in every sense of the word. His lodgings are always in danger of being disturbed by Norman, the owner of Pembroke Books, and because he can read—unlike any other member of his family—he is considered odd. When they all leave the Pembroke home he stays behind, to prosper, to become educated, and to suffer the anguish of being unable to speak his thoughts, and never to be properly part of any world he may

discover. Fellow rats disgust him, humans want to kill him, and in the end, only one man, a struggling older writer, befriends him. When the last stores in Scollay Square are demolished, Firmin stays put, content to be alone with *Finnegans Wake*.

Despite its occasional bare patches, and an unnecessary repetition that Firmin can't do this or that because he isn't human, Savage has sidestepped the perils of Ratman's Notebook or the tweeness of much literature written for children that has animal-like figures in it. Referring to such works, Firmin says: "The only literature I cannot abide is rat literature, including mouse literature." (The self-hatred in that is consistent with a wariness for his own kind.) "I despise good-natured old Ratty in *The Wind in the Willows*. I piss down the throats of Mickey Mouse and Stuart Little. Affable, shuffling, *cute*, they stick in my craw like fish bones." Those yellow teeth come out more than once, as when he eats a piece of lettuce and says it "tasted like Jane Eyre." Firmin has a softer side, too, or else the novel would not be so appealing. He recalls "paperbacks, especially the ones from New Directions, with their black-and-white covers, and the serious, austere ones from Scribner's." He can be lyrical, too, as when remembering how "the yellowing evening slowly filled the shop with a kind of airy grief."

Airy grief in some way sums up Firmin's predicament. It's impossible to read Firmin and not contemplate what it's like to be out of step with everyone, forever, and not through choice. This trim novel is a modest delight, with its clever conceit, an abiding respect for literature, and geniality co-existing with melancholy. The illustrations at the head of each chapter nicely complement the text.

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