

A Light-Hearted Romp in Satire

CLINIC

By Christine Johnson

Alexandrian Press (1070 Arastradero Rd., Palo Alto, CA 94303);
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REVIEWED BY SHEILA KOREN

Clinic" by Christine Johnson is a light-hearted romp through several heavy-handed institutions. Its contrived character names, often embarrassing hyperbole and an opening line as trite as "It was a night not unlike most other summer nights in Loma Verde..." combine to make this intelligent adventure story highly farcical. The story comes complete with Bay Area background, hilarious happenstance and cathartic jabs at sleazy doctors, self-serving gurus and other bastions of hypocrisy.

Johnson's penchant for name-playing is, however, merciless, beginning with the novel's narrator — a Scotch-drinking, leg-watching newspaper editor, Ben Boyer, whose Loma Verde Vindicator staff investigates scandal at prestigious Greenwich University. The university boasts a right-wing Warren Harding Institute for Normalcy, whose members vacation in a Bosnian Woods retreat on the Russian River, and its notable alumnae include a gastronomic guru named Baba Rhum and Dyke Upjohn, a lesbian novelist.

The university's chancellor and her husband are named Miranda and Pete (i.e., Ma and Pa) Kettle. The suicide attempt of their troubled daughter opens this "simmering



FROM "CLINIC"

stew" of a story into which is thrown a slimy doctor named Duke Eele and a pompous one named Joe Kuhl.

Suing Dr. Eele, whose metaphor of a name is stretched to ridiculous lengths (as in "that Eele is a real wriggler") is a disgruntled ex-patient, Peach Kling, within whom Eele once left an instrument.

The novel's protagonists (and the only characters with reasonable names), Maria Forsythe and Michael Weintraub, are investigative reporters assigned by Boyer to expose the university's medical clinic, particularly after no one in its public relations department has been able to "cough up homecoming game tickets" for him.

Following Miranda Kettle to the ashram to which she

has run away with information-filled Dr. Carpaccio, Michael and Maria wind up uncovering the most scrumptious story of the century:

Da Free John's recently publicized excesses will pale in comparison with Swami Baba Rhum, whose culinary considerations of "input and output" lead him and his faithful followers to ponder, between feasts, such difficult gastronomic questions as: "What is more delicious, the brioche or the croissant?" and to meditate, before meals, upon the incantation: "O Swami of Swamis, regarding one who knows that which is uneatable, changeless, beyond destruction and beyond time, how can such a person eat or cause to be eaten?"

Among Baba Rhum's array of illustrious and ridiculous disciples is none other than the former infamous Secretary of State Henry Warringer (now Partha Henry). "Just looking at him," says Carpaccio (now Gupta Gateau), "makes you realize he's always been into food."

Meanwhile, Joe Kuhl, who has been busy promoting health on TV, gets selected as the personal physician of the Dalai Lama, providing the story with more exotic locale — and his profession with more scorn — when he becomes disgruntled with the "barley balls and Buddhist bells" of Tibet and goes on to promote ginseng-enriched Zippi Cola throughout Asia.

Ever searching for answers to what are not really very provocative medical questions — particularly in a book titled "Clinic"— Maria and Michael's globe-trotting investigative and romantic adventures are unquestionably entertaining.

"Clinic" is a spoof with a social conscience. It is also clearly the first novel of a talented, perceptive and witty author who tried just a bit too hard. ■

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