

REVIEW: Firmin by Sam Savage

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Firmin: Adventures of a Metropolitan Lowlife – Sam Savage

Orion, 2008

192 pages

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Reviewed by Lev Lafayette

If all books were this good reviewers wouldn't be needed. The setting, character and plot summary on the back cover would suffice. Usually, I am perhaps a somewhat harsh critic, recognising the empirical truth of Sturgeon's Law with the bell curve of cultural products indicating that the overwhelming majority of novels simply do not reach the standard of greatness – and I love greatness in the arts. But this novel is different; it is a great novel. I have had it my possession for three days and I've read it four times; I'm getting obsessive and that is not at all to my normal temperament by any stretch of the imagination.

So instead of making a dent in the growing stack of books that I received from Ticonderoga and promised to review I am reviewing *Firmin: Adventures of a Metropolitan Lowlife*, the first novel by a Yale University doctor of philosophy, Dr. Sam Savage. Being far too modest to include his appropriate title, "Doc Savage" appears as an aging gent with an unkempt beard, wavy hair and rheumy eyes. The 2008 edition by Weindenfeld & Nicolson, an imprint of Orion, comes with an illustration by Fernando Krahn of the main character expressed in the title, a thin and dishevelled rat with hungry and worried eyes reading over an open book. Part of the top cover gives the impression of having been chewed, as anyone with experience with the combination of rodents and books would be all too aware. The physical appearance is delightful but deceptively suggests something that is relatively light and happy reading.

This is an fictional autobiography and certainly falls in the category of 'magical realism', which is certainly one of the better genres that straddles realist fiction with the fantastic. Whilst all the events occur just prior to the historic redevelopment of the dilapidated and morally questionable Scollay Square of Boston in the 1960s, and includes a number of real places and individuals from that time and place, there is but one element of fantasy: A rat, the runt of a litter, is born in the basement of bookshop and in his quest for sustenance turns to eating paper and thus, through this most literal consumption of texts, acquires the ability to read.

Now it is quite possible at this stage that the book could turn terribly cute, but true to a genre which include such luminaries as Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* it does not. The reference to novels of this quality is quite deliberate; this book belongs in the same category. The 'magical ability' of the main character is not necessary to the narrative as such, although it serves as an excellent metaphor and the author is evidently very aware of the life cycle and behaviour of the rat. Firmin, although a most literate rodent, does not have the capacity to speak and so must live a double life, observing humans which he adores, but unable to participate directly in their society and each time he attempts to do so ends with him in grave danger. In all other respects except for his comprehension of the written and spoken word, he is in most respects a standard, everyday, street rat, scavenging for food and water, seeking shelter and generally engaging in the desperate struggle for survival.

Expressed in the simplicity of a first-person narration, but with a highly complex character, one cannot help but be thoroughly charmed by Firmin's personality and development. Although a pervert by his species standards (he quite enjoys visiting his 'angels', the strippers and watching pornographic films in the local dive called a cinema), he is also extremely self-reflective existentialist and – oddly of course – a deeply considerate humanist, although somewhat cantankerous. He has been raised on a diet of the best, such as Joyce, Balzac, Dostoevsky, but is also quite skilled in areas of non-fiction and popular culture. As a result his intellect, knowledge and vocabulary is excellent, and one occasion I even found myself checking the dictionary to ensure that a word was not a typographical error (my initial assumption was correct – the unusual word was indeed genuine, and so I have learned something new). Through Firmin, Doc. Savage shows such excellent skills in both writing style and technique that one cannot help becoming very attached indeed to this fictional character.

A word of warning is necessary however, as this attachment can become painful. "This is the saddest story I have ever heard", writes Doc Savage appropriately with credit, the first words of Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier* in beginning Firmin's autobiography. There are, as one should expect, literary references and allusions throughout this tale. But to repeat myself, this is not a cute fantasy about a sapient rat, but a realistic novel of a lonely and distressingly isolated individual which just so happens to be a sapient street rat who also represents the social and physical environment of bohemian authors, readers and bookstore that feature within. Anyone with



even a kernel of love for these people and their life may indeed find themselves bleary-eyed, if not positively tearful, as Fermin, both rodent and the spirit of the time and place, meets his inevitable end – the relative shortness of the novel just adds to the sense of shortened lifespan and the immediacy of the destruction of Scollay Square. Least one feels just slightly silly at the degree of heartbreak over a fictional rat, one is reminded that this is not just *rattus norvegicus sapiens*, but also the destruction of a place and the people who inhabited it.