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Portrait of a bitter biographer, heart aswirl in envy of subject

Ticknor
By Sheila Heti

Farrar Straus & Giroux.

118 pp. \$18

Reviewed by Mark Sarvas



A man walks through the rainy streets of 19th-century Boston, en route to a dinner party, carrying a pie. He dithers. He frets. He contrasts his own woeful fortunes with those of his prosperous host, reviewing a laundry list of slights and resentments, real and imagined, along the way. It's the slenderest of conceits for a novel, but Sheila Heti's diminutive debut *Ticknor* contains multitudes.

Biographer George Ticknor's friendship with his great subject, historian W.H. Prescott, was the foundation of his 1864 *Life of William Hickling Prescott*, a popular and critical success. Pulling this obscure page from the archives, Heti has turned their friendship on its head, transforming it into a darkly funny anti-history, a hilariously biting study of envy, bitterness and promise unfulfilled. In her masterfully reimagined landscape, *her* Ticknor - quite unlike his real-life counterpart - is a thwarted second-rater, all talk and very little action, forever toiling in the shadow of his wildly successful childhood friend.

The book consists of an elaborate inner monologue, with Ticknor's thoughts and impressions tumbling over one another as he surveys the years of his friendship with Prescott, charting the inverted trajectories of their careers. Heti, a Canadian whose debut short-story collection *The Middle Stories* was published by McSweeney's, has pulled off a tour de force of ventriloquism, seamlessly inhabiting Ticknor's fussy, circular 19th-century diction. But Heti has more on her mind than mere mimicry. Consider these lines from the first page of *Ticknor*, in which the narrator reflects on the scarcity of books during his

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childhood, which he blames for his lack of literary taste:

There is no possible way I could have read good books. It was for pleasure that I read them, when I finally did. Today you read books. Yes, today I read books but there were no books when I was a boy, and I do not read books the way other men read books. My taste, then, was juvenile. But you were like all the other boys.

From the first page Ticknor lays himself bare, a man excluded, more or less from the outset, forever seeking to explain or justify the exclusion. But he's also his own interrogator - his own biographer - and as the biographer must consider and challenge the accounts of his subjects, so poor Ticknor puts himself through the wringer. And in doing so, Heti hints at some fascinating paradoxes regarding the nature of the biographer: Which account of Prescott can we really believe, Ticknor's envious inner thoughts or his public paean, the hugely successful *Life*?

It sounds like potentially ponderous stuff, but the gleaming heart of Heti's dark jewel is its sly, mischievous humor, and it saves her Ticknor from becoming insufferable, even if the laughs come at his expense:

His correspondences at the time were at their best. I had believed friends were preserving mine, but in visits outside of Boston they showed me his. It wouldn't matter so much if it weren't for the fact that I made no copies.

Poor Ticknor! Fate and literary society have ganged up to deny him even a modicum of solace. The book also displays Heti's fine way with an epigram:

So long as one's sensitiveness is to run from the rough impact of life, it is neither strenuousness nor austerity that one needs, but only consolation.

Still, for all of *Ticknor's* humor, there's some serious business afoot here, as the sense of exclusion adumbrated on the first page can never be overcome. He can never quite carry himself across the threshold to join the party and eat that peach. Here he is as he arrives at the Prescotts:

But it's impossible to think I didn't foresee it - staring up at the warmly lit windows from the street, softly holding coins in my pocket, and wishing I was inside already. I stood there like a beggar, then turned and left through the rain-soaked streets.

Heti has nominated a worthy addition to the Pantheon of the Woebegone. Somewhere, Prufrock is smiling through the tears.

Mark Sarvas, a Los Angeles writer, hosts the literary weblog *The Elegant Variation* (www.elegvar.com).

