

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius: Based on a True Story by Dave Eggers (Picador, R112)

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Feed your search engine 'Eggers' and 'genius', and chances are it will register more than a thousand hits (mine returned 1270), most of them reviews of this phenomenally successful book. A recurring concern of these reviews is whether this is indeed a heartbreaking work of staggering genius, or just another Generation X ego trip.

Clearly, the cleverest thing about this immensely clever book is its title: instead of asking, as we might have of a less ambitiously named novel, "Is it any good?", we ask "Is it really *that* good?" My own answer (no 1271) is well no, but . . .

Well no, it's too self-absorbed to be really heartbreaking, and it's too dependent on the tricks of the po-mo trade to be genius; but . . . Eggers writes with the ease, energy and panache of a figure skater. Opening the book at random, I find: "Outside it's blue-black and getting darker. There is a man walking up the steps. He is unshaven and is wearing sandals and a poncho from, one can be almost sure, hemp. I do not want to talk to this man."

The ability to create drama out of what turns out to be the arrival of the baby sitter, the sharp eye for Bay Area stereotypes (the hemp poncho), the send-up of the staccato dark-and-stormy- night kind of writing, the self-validating point of view: Eggers does it all with the control and flair with which he handles a frisbee.

Indeed, some of the most exhilarating passages in the book are descriptions of Eggers and his brother showing off with a frisbee: "We take four steps for each throw, and when we throw the world stops and gasps. We throw so far, and with such accuracy, and with such ridiculous beauty. We are perfection, harmony, young and lithe, fast like Indians."

One reviewer has commented that Eggers can write about anything and make it interesting. This is just as well, since he doesn't write about very much. The plot is easily told: after the death of both his parents in less than five months, Eggers found himself looking after his eight year old brother Toph. They moved from Chicago to the promised land of San Francisco, where Eggers spent much of his time and money trying to get a satirical magazine called *Might* off the ground; eventually he

and Toph head for New York, where -- and this is not in the book - Eggers founded the by now highly successful literary review *McSweeney's* (www.mcsweeney.net)

Although this is a memoir rather than a novel, Eggers constructs himself as lovingly as Henry James created Isabel Archer or Fitzgerald fashioned Gatsby, and produces a new-Millennium version of the American aw-shucks hero of whom Huckleberry Finn was the prototype and Bill Clinton the downside. The Eggers version is highly likeable, much more knowing than Huck, much more honest than Bill, and very good at cashing in on both his knowingness and his honesty.

The 39-page preface, in which we are instructed that the author is 'in one word: appealing', establishes, as the author also tells us, that 'While the author is self-conscious about being self-referential, he is also knowing about that self-conscious self-referentiality.' This sounds about as interesting as having a conversation with someone who is watching himself in a mirror (or a succession of mirrors), and indeed, as the author would of course be the first to admit, the book is in the first place a generous (at 375 pages some might say over-generous) tribute to the staggering genius of the author, held together largely by the author's self-regard.

But if the work lacks objective shape, it does have a focus of sorts, once again helpfully or officiously anticipated for us in the preface: "while the author searches for love - there will be some episodes involving that - and his brother searches for, you know whatever little kids search for (gum and pennies?) and together they try to be normal and happy, they actually will probably always be unsuccessful in any and every extra-curricular relationship, given that the only people they truly admire and love and find perfect are each other."

Of course, one would like to hear Toph's views on this (and in time, no doubt, we will), but in the meantime this angle is - of course - appealing, and the sections dealing with Toph have a comic mother-hen frenzy about them that I suspect were largely responsible for the book's success: at heart it's another one of those stories that get made into aw-gee movies about big strong men finding themselves stuck with a kid. (Eggers has reputedly turned down millions for the film rights, but don't be too surprised if *AHWOSG - The Movie* shows up at a cinema near you).

Heading for New York, as Huck at the end of his novel lights out for the Territory, Eggers remains the free-wheeling American hero, easy rider, on the road, on the move, exuding the exhilarating conviction that to be alive and young and in America is the meaning of life: "'I think it's good to move around, see stuff, not get stuck,' Toph says, and I love him for saying that." In middle age

this may give way to the other great American fictional strain of anxiety, alcoholism and adultery, but while it lasts it has great charm and vitality.

Ultimately, reading this book is very much like - well, like watching a virtuoso frisbee performer: you admire the energy, the skill, the sheer uncompetitive joyfulness of the performance: "We look like professionals, like we've been playing together for years. Busty women stop and stare. Senior citizens sit and shake their heads in wonder. Religious people fall to their knees. No one has ever seen anything like it."

Maybe. And yet it's not difficult to imagine, on the edge of the awe-struck crowd, a sour outsider, possibly a literary critic, muttering to himself: "Yes, very pretty, but what's the point?"