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WEINSTOCK AMONG THE DYING

By Michael Blumenthal

300 pp. Zoland Books

Poet Michael Blumenthal's satiric debut novel probes the weighty question: Does the anguish of childhood forge our character or break our spirit? Born to Holocaust-era German Jews, Martin Weinstock was adopted at birth by an aunt already suffering from breast cancer. After she died ten years later, Martin was never permitted time to mourn her. This shaped him into a man incapable of conjugal love and obsessed by death. So he should feel right at home at Harvard, within whose "thanatic corridors" he lectures on poetry and is offered directorship of the creative writing program. Through Weinstock, Mr. Blumenthal, former director of creative writing at Harvard, voices scathing, if gratingly redundant, attacks on Harvard, portrayed here as the most arid landscape this side of Eliot's Waste Land. Occasional flashes of wit aptly illuminate the pretention and institutional narcissism attendant on being reputed the world's finest university. Quickly, however, the laughter fades beneath the cacophony of Weinstock's whiny voices, one his plaintive self-analysis, another the doleful screech of an ax grinding on ivy walls. Mr. Blumenthal's lampooning of academic pomposity is on target, but the sanctimonious stridency of his attack becomes itself the smugness he tries to mock. Readers may suspect the story behind this novel would prove more engaging than the novel itself.