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THE HISTORIAN: Six fantasies of the American experience

By Eugene K. Garber

Illustrated. 233 pp. Milkweed Editions.

Eugene K. Garber's *The Historian* won TriQuarterly's William Goyen Award for Fiction, yet these six "fantasies" set between 1807 and 1912 are barely fiction at all. In this handsome volume vivified by Kathryn Nobbe's illustrations, Mr. Garber's focus is far more speculative than narrative. The titular historian, modeled on Henry Adams and Lincoln Steffens, sets off to discover the essence of history and America, hoping both may be revealed if he finds Clio, the muse of history. When the historian's cousin Simms, a frontiersman, moves center stage, Mr. Garber renders engaging incidents, such as a fatal duel with snowballs at 20 paces. More often, however, the historian himself becomes a pedantic vehicle for fustian aphorisms ranging from the speciously cute ("Flowering and deflowering are only two sides of the same membrane") to the facile (history is "merely man taking up one idea and then another and working each one out"). Although capable of intermittent cogency, such as his portrait of Pittsburgh in 1911 as an archetype of political and media corruption by industry, the historian seems in quest less of truth or muses than debating points. The book's self-congratulatory erudition sheds no heat and only flickering light. When all is said and done, far more is said than done.