

San Francisco Chronicle Sept. 1997

## THE FLAMINGO RISING

By Larry Baker

Knopf; 309 pp.

Like the America he lives in, Abraham Isaac Lee, the protagonist of Larry Baker's radiant debut novel, will spend the years between 1953 and 1968 losing his innocence and sowing the seeds of a guilt that may never go away. He tells us this on the novel's first page, as he hears the book's most intriguing character "whose sad and smirky voice tells me that I must forgive myself."

But Abe's longing for atonement is misleading, providing no clue that what follows will be in the masterfully quirky and often hilarious tale of the Lee's family business in Jacksonville, Fla., running The Flamingo, America's largest drive-in movie theater.

In 1953, Turner West wants to put a cemetery beside his funeral parlor, but the far wealthier Hubert T. Lee, heir to a Winston-Salem family fortune, has bought up all the adjacent land and erected the garish Flamingo. Lee has also just brought back from Korea two orphaned newborns: Abe, a full-blooded Korean, and his future sister Louise, the product of a Korean mother and American father, so beautiful that "even today, men and woman stare at her when she passes them."

West, widowed in 1953 by childbirth, covets not only Lee's land but also Lee's wife, Edna, leading to a perpetual running feud between the two men. Abe, then, seems star-crossed when at 12 he enters St. Agnes School and sees for the first time West's daughter Grace. Grace had been the class's smartest student before Abe came, and the prettiest before Louise came. "For the next six years Louise and Grace were the twin suns of their parochial cosmos, exuding heat and light as we revolved around them." For Abe and Grace, it is love at first sight, although it will take years for them to say so.

But their two households are not alike in dignity. While West, for all his envy, is a man of patience and reserve, Lee, a Ph.D.-candidate drop-out, is flakier than a buttermilk biscuit. He indulges in a string of gaudy promotions, including importing a gigantic neon cowboy, aimed at driving West crazy, and hires a wonderfully colorful assortment of employees, all of whom must live in the drive-in's tower except for diminutive black Pete, who lives in a caboose.

Among those employees are two fascinating young women: Polly Jackson, a blonde Baby Doll/Lolita whose constantly exposed flesh brings teenaged Abe's hormones to instant boil, and Alice Kite, the sage and mysterious figure who will mentor young Abe. If Grace will provide Abe's world with unwavering love, Alice provides its resonance and romance, becoming the novel's most unforgettable character, even to Abe: "I was in love with Grace, but Alice was more interesting to me. I was happy with Grace,

calm and happy, but I did not spend time wondering about her, wondering who she really was."

The real magic here lies in the affection and simple decency with which Abe tells his story, a coming-of-age tale filled with uproarious Thurberesque scenes such as the rockets red glare along the Atlantic and atop the West funeral home on the night of July 4, 1967. We know far in advance that most things will turn out well, as Abe relates events from 25 years later, when he and Grace are married, wealthy and the parents of three sons, and Louise is a famous actress.

Brown, a history and English teacher planning to run for mayor of Iowa City, seems not at all like a first-time novelist. His skill in creating picturesque characters makes this a *David Copperfield* for our times and a richly textured portrait of a less jaded America. His tale has minor inaccuracies (The Flamingo shows in 1968 a movie that came out in 1970), and his ending may seem jarringly out of key with the rest of the novel, but these flaws detract little from this tale of a boy brought to America to be surrounded by varieties of love while he steadfastly pursues his goals of Grace and grace.