

Shapiro humanizes mental illness in 'Picnic' collection

Book review

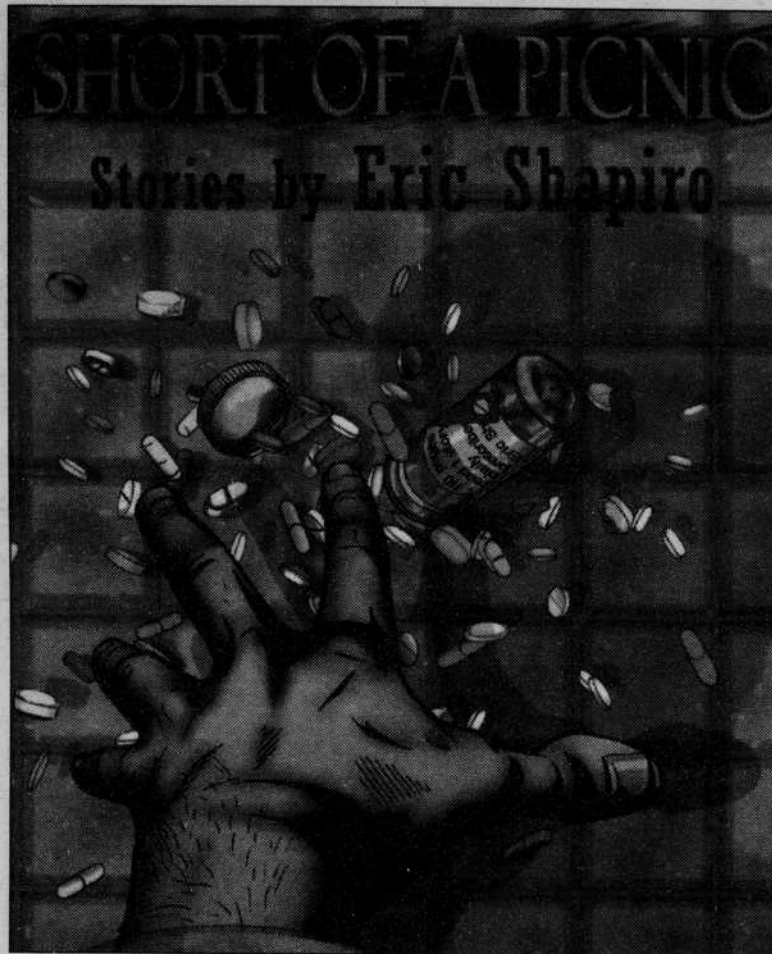
It's not a clinical condition, but I have a bipolar relationship with short stories. They're inherently aggravating, it seems, because they don't offer complete satisfaction. Some short stories tell half the tale, leaving an involved reader filled with angst when the characters' lives aren't fully revealed.

On the other hand, short stories are perhaps the most sublime literary pleasure in existence. A perfectly crafted piece gives just enough details to make the characters' motivations and sympathies understandable, and it withholds any information that would disturb the equilibrium between imagination and story.

"Short of a Picnic," a collection of short stories about mental illness and the very human, sometimes wacky people who live with these diseases, falls into the latter category. The 24-year-old author, Eric Shapiro, has battled obsessive-compulsive disorder for more than a decade, according to his press kit, and the gentle, lighthearted touch he brings to the characters shows that he knows of what he speaks.

I'm not often given to effusiveness about literature, but these stories are fantastic. They have a quirky humanity that says it's okay to talk about mental illness. It's okay to say "crazy" and "wacky" and "madness" — as long as you recognize that those afflicted with faulty wiring are feeling, thinking people worthy of respect.

Reading these stories easily conveys that humanity. They're twisted and they don't always progress with a sense of linear time, and in that way they remind me of "Dogwalker" by Arthur Bradford, or perhaps the work of Eric Bogosian (or at least what I always hope Eric Bogosian will be but isn't).



Courtesy

In short, these characters are eccentric. The scenarios are odd, fun and ring terribly true. Shapiro's writing is crisp and simple, with punchy sentences and a "hip" sensibility. This collection should have been picked up by the often-stellar MTV Books; it would be right at home next to "Tunnel Vision" or "Crooked."

The opening story, "Carl," relates a familiar scene: Mother and children eat at a fast food restaurant while the crazy homeless man next to them talks to himself. Except here, the read-

er gets a taste of the man's mind, and the action builds a bit out of control. It's scary and realistic.

The third story, "undivided attention," gives a glimpse into the mind of a kid who school officials have decided "isn't going to make it." The kid disagrees, but that doesn't change the way the officials treat him.

In "dope and veins" we get the story of heroin addicts, and it becomes easy to see how — if not why — they are sucked into shooting another hit.

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Raw

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The character of enzymes, which is foundational to its practitioners but practically ignored by the scientific community, is at the core of raw foodism. Raw foodists maintain that raw foods contain enzymes that aid in their own digestion. However, if food is heated above 118 degrees Fahrenheit, the enzymes are destroyed. Raw foodists claim that as a result, digestion siphons from our finite reserve of enzymes and diminishes our immune system, which depends upon enzymes to battle illness. These ideas can be traced back to Dr. Edward Howell, who wrote his theories of the role of enzymes in digestion more than 70 years ago.

Scientists agree that enzymes are destroyed at approximately 118 degrees, but disagree over the existence of a limited reserve of enzymes. There are no documented evaluations by the scientific establishment on the advantages of a raw food diet.

Regardless of the debate, practitioners say the proof is in the pudding. "What convinced me was the difference I felt in myself," said raw foodist April Curtis, a single mother of four who has been trying to turn her kids on to the diet.

"Two hours later, the energy you feel is amazing," she said.

Information on the subject was scarce just a few years ago. Today, an online search returns scores of Web sites that praise the diet for not only a boost in energy but increased men-

tal clarity, decreased depression and anxiety and a strengthened immune system. Success stories abound of people with debilitating illnesses, weight problems or lethargy who have felt the rewards and even outright cures from a raw foods diet.

"I could dive into the science and explain this and that," Duran said. "But really, all you have to do is start to do it and that's all the proof you'll need."

Be it phad thai, spinach and "cheese" ravioli or Mexican tostadas, the ever-growing list of raw recipes continue to surprise even the most raw tongues as innovators have turned the practice into a bona fide cuisine. Raw food restaurants have become hugely successful in San Francisco and New York. Conquering Lions Live Food, located at 1433 Willamette St. inside Cozmic Pizza, is the only restaurant in Eugene solely dedicated to raw foods. Mitrani said she's excited about the restaurant and the diet's future.

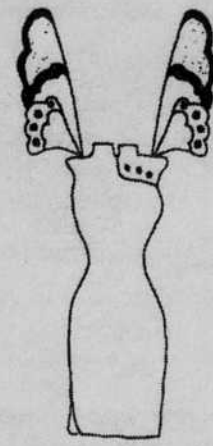
"It's definitely a discipline," Mitrani said, echoing the thoughts of a number of raw foodists. "The restaurant helps, and that's what I hope to provide."

The Eugene Raw Foods Community sponsors a variety of classes and events. For more information, visit the group's Web site at www.homestead.com/raweugene.

The Red Barn Natural Grocery, located at 357 Van Buren St., hosts free introductory meetings at 6 p.m. on the first and third Tuesday of every month.

Contact the Pulse reporter at markbaylis@dailyemerald.com.

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