

Eating Out Eating Out Eating Out Eating Out Eating Out Eating Out Eating Out Eating Out Eating Out

REVIEWS

THE CHELSEA WHISTLE
by Michelle Tea; Seal Press, 2002;
\$14.95 softcover

"Childhood is morbid" is the perfect start for Michelle Tea's latest memoir about her "sicko" (pre)adolescent life in Boston's desolate slum of Chelsea. *The Chelsea Whistle* is the author's uncontrived, debauched account of growing up working class during the '70s and '80s with, inevitably, all related tragic ingredients included: a good-for-nothing drunk of a dad, an absent mom, a perverted stepfather, violent and/or sex-crazed neighborhood boys, etc.

She is Little Red Riding Hood but a notch smarter, making it out alive and away from the deceitful harbor of the nuclear family and the disheartening small town. A survivor of the mean Catholic school nuns of Our Lady of Assumption, harsh Italian dance teachers, horrid tap shoes and much more, the Sister Spit rebel has come back with a memoir to shout out about the treacherous world in which little girls are raised.

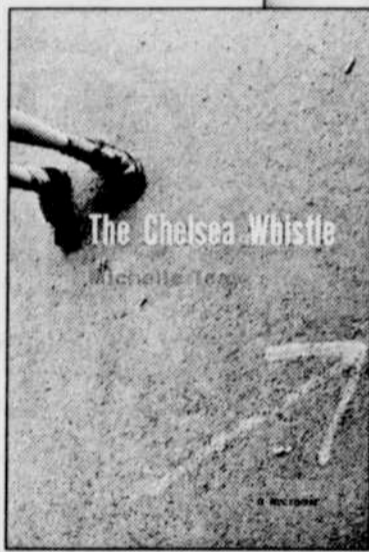
Chelsea covers Tea's unglamorous upbringing—leading to the eccentric gritty dyke life confessed in her earlier work *Valencia*—with two-thirds focusing on tragicomic childhood sketches and lots of prequeer explorations of love.

A fast-speed stream of consciousness glues unconnected memories together, easily flowing from lover boy Goths into the quintessential last straight boy on to the first girl we all really want to read about: "Me and Clive really had a terrible relationship, and it went on forever. But somewhere between its start and finish came Juniper. She was Mack's girlfriend, and she was beautiful. The whole point of Mack was that he led up to Juniper."

The anecdotes hop along, but at times, the lovely Tea gets too amorous with herself and the equation of coolness with being stoned, smoking lots of cigarettes and drinking tons of booze takes over. That supposedly edgy waft is intended to indicate a hip urban air, but repetitively stressing the point becomes ultimately tiresome and causes the story to lose its elegant stride.

All in all *Chelsea* is an easy, entertaining read even though the book deals with plenty of misfortune and depressing characters. Somehow the author continually has the amazing ability to lift herself above it all and extract the drollness out of every situation.

Or, like she confides in this self-referential passage early on in the memoir: "Sitting casually at a strange family's house, wiping the Ragu from my lips with a paper towel as I continued... 'And Then The Cops Came And Dragged My Dad Out Of The House. And I Had To Go To School The Very Next Day!' I'd shake my head at the absurdity of life and take a sip of Coke, while my audience lingered on the last of my words, clucking their tongues, marveling at the insane



Michelle Tea pens a prequel to *Valencia*

life I'd survived, and the ease with which I'd let my tragedies roll off me."
It's a skill to be proud of.

—Els Debbaut

PTOWN: ART, SEX AND MONEY ON THE OUTER CAPE
by Peter Manso; Scribner, 2002; \$25 hardcover

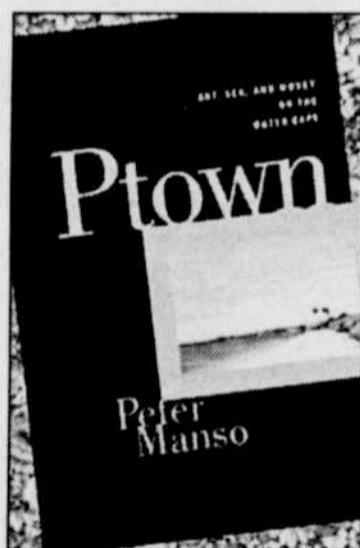
Peter Manso's fascinating *Ptown: Art, Sex and Money on the Outer Cape* tells the history of what has been called "the gayest place in America." Formerly a haven for pirates and thieves, the quaint Portuguese (and very Catholic) fishing village became a Mecca for bohemians and artists at the end of the 19th century. By the 1950s the Massachusetts town was a popular tourist destination for gay men and lesbians, many of whom bought property and have become a political and economic force.

With only one birth in 2000 among a year-round population of 3,500, the demographics of Provincetown have clearly shifted. The spit of land on the tip of the eastern seaboard has a poverty rate that is 60 percent higher than the rest of the state yet housing prices that make it the costliest town on Cape Cod. According to local real estate agents, 97 percent of all recent home buyers have been gay.

In *Ptown*, the shifts in culture and demographics are told through the compelling experiences of the town's residents—some native, some transplants. From the fisherman who gets caught up in an almost comical botched smuggling episode to the famous author whose parties are legendary for their drunken and drug-induced debauchery, every story is engrossing.

It's unfortunate that the most complete accounts have taken place since the 1970s (and are about those the author seems to know personally). The unique history of Provincetown is so captivating, I wish Manso had provided the same level of detail for some of the earlier stories. But that's a minor quibble with a book highly worth reading.

—Floyd Sklover



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