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Verbal abuse over-the-top in 'Underminer'

By Alex Gorelik, Special to the News
February 18, 2005

The Underminer is a monologue that talks at us through 14 years of subtle insults and doublespeak.

Satirist Mike Albo and co-writer Virginia Heffernan manage to create a character that is so malicious, so insensitive and sadistic, that we can only gape horror-struck as every venomous phrase rolls off her tongue.



Mike Albo and co-author employ many sub- culture references.

BOOKS Info:

Our Rating: **C-**

Title: The Underminer

Author: Mike Albo and Virginia Heffernan

Publisher: Bloomsbury

Pages: 4 pages

ISBN: 0-8050-7111-1

Price: \$19.95

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The anonymous target of this insidious abuse remains unnamed throughout the ordeal, being referred to only as "you," making reading this passive-aggressive abasement all the more unpleasant.

Our first conversation with the Underminer occurs in the last days of college as a group of friends prepares to go its separate ways. In one 15-minute conversation, she manages to bring up "your" every ex-boyfriend, ill-fated fling and embarrassing drunken moment. She insults "your" major and highlights in a not-so-delicate manner the

many ways "you" have failed.

These sorts of brief encounters continue again and again throughout the next decade and a half. In every instance, the Underminer manages to dig up old hurts, undercut and degrade our anonymous heroine's ambitions, and even persuade her to get on a controversial mood stabilizer with disastrous results.

All the while, she never fails to flaunt her own amazing success, her celebrity friends and all the wonderful things that just seem to keep happening to her.

For a short time, this abuse is entertaining. Albo and Heffernan manage to weave a generation of subculture references into the one-sided spiel. They have our hapless heroine bounce from poetry-reading barista at a hip New York coffee shop to indie rock singer, from Burning Man celebrant to art gallery volunteer to yoga class initiate. But at every turn the result is the same: The Underminer always manages to belittle the heroine while praising someone else as superior.

For a while, the Underminer's sheer audacity forces us to read on, waiting to see what she says next, horrified as if watching the paramedics unravel a deadly car accident.

Perhaps the most repulsive incident occurs when the two characters meet at the Burning Man festival in the desert of Nevada during the summer of 1999. The Underminer learns that the protagonist has just taken hallucinogenic mushrooms and immediately begins inducing a nervous breakdown.

"Do you hear that whistling? That sound, coming closer, coming closer. The land and air are merging into one. A screeching sky of demonic hawks . . . Things are going to start warping for you but I'm here . . . Can you hear me? You probably can't. I probably sound far away . . . Like a voice peeling away, and peeling away everything solid and grounding with it."

This goes on and on, torturing and cruel. "You may feel the dust in a breath that travels to your feet . . . That dust is so pervasive. Made of so much filth . . . Dust made of crusts of hungry Third World eyes, the little flecks of pollen on dirty flies, the dust that's made of ground bones from old mass graves and bacterial spores from seeping landfills piled with our ignorant waste."

This onslaught only ends when the protagonist finally collapses in a heap, absolutely broken and traumatized.

Unfortunately, there is little else beyond masochism peppered with a dark humor to give this book depth. We're forced to experience the character's life through the corrosive eyes of the Underminer, thus having little sympathy for the heroine, or anyone in this thin veneer of a story. The joke gets old fairly quickly, and after that, all we have is more of the same acidic obesity comments, diminutives and debasements.

The formula may have worked as a short story, or even as a stand-up routine, but there's not enough meat in it to fill out a novel.

Alex Gorelik is a freelance writer living in Denver.





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