



## The Cry of the Sloth

*Sam Savage, Michael Mikolowski (Illustrator)*

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**The Cry of the Sloth** Sam Savage , Michael Mikolowski (Illustrator)

Living on a diet of fried Spam, vodka, sardines, cupcakes, and Southern Comfort, Andrew Whittaker is slowly being sucked into the morass of middle age. A negligent landlord, small-time literary journal editor, and aspiring novelist, he is--quite literally-- authoring his own downfall. From his letters, diary entries, and fragments of fiction, to grocery lists and posted signs, this novel is a collection of everything Whittaker commits to paper over the course of four critical months.

Beginning in July, during the economic hardships of the Nixon era, we witness our hero hounded by tenants and creditors, harassed by a loathsome local arts group, and tormented by his ex-wife. Determined to redeem his failures and eviscerate his enemies, Whittaker hatches a grand plan. But as winter nears, his difficulties accumulate, and the disorder of his life threatens to overwhelm him. As his hold on reality weakens and his schemes grow wilder, his self-image as a placid and slow-moving sloth evolves into that of a bizarre and frantic creature driven mad by solitude.

In this tragicomic portrait of a literary life, Sam Savage proves that all the evidence is in the writing, that all the world is, indeed, a stage, and that escape from the mind's prison requires a command performance.

## The Cry of the Sloth Details

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Author : Sam Savage , Michael Mikolowski (Illustrator)

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## From Reader Review The Cry of the Sloth for online ebook

### Ula says

Written only from the POV of the main character through letters he writes to people, I thought it would be hard to follow but it was a really quick and interesting read. Andy Whittaker is a self-centered, selfish, delusional, sexist, racist and totally unlikeable character yet Sam Savage manages to pull just a few tiny bits of sympathy for him here and there in the letters. Very well written and a good book I got from Powell's Indiespensable subscription. (woo woo go Powell's!)

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### Roberta says

*What happens to us  
either happens to everyone or only to us;  
in the first instance it's banal;  
in the second it's incomprehensible.*  
- Fernando Pessoa

Se *Life After Life*, la mia precedente lettura, poteva essere definito un romanzo *larger than life*, una storia di formazione in cui la protagonista impara, vita dopo vita appunto, a dare il meglio di sé proprio quando la vita le offre il peggio, anche se sa già che non riuscirà a fare tutto giusto, *The Cry of the Sloth* (*Il lamento del bradipo* in traduzione) è esattamente il contrario: una storia che invece di celebrare la fiducia nella natura umana, ne celebra la bassezza (nella persona del suo protagonista, Andrew Whittaker, un romanzo claustrofobico, una spirale di auto-distruzione).

Arrivata a metà del romanzo (breve, per fortuna) ero abbastanza annoiata da pensare di abbandonarlo, ma ho perseverato, fondamentalmente per due motivi: 1) questa (<http://93bcn.blogspot.it/2009/09/cry-...>) recensione; 2) la curiosità di vedere se c'era qualcosa nel romanzo che poteva smentire la mia interpretazione (sopra riportata). Alla fine, non ho ancora capito cosa la lettrice della recensione che vi ho linkata abbia visto di così poderoso in questo romanzo, e non ho trovato nessun cenno di redenzione nello stesso.

*The Cry of the Sloth* non è un cattivo romanzo: è scritto molto bene, sviluppato come un romanzo epistolare (ma non proprio: riporta tutto ciò che il protagonista scrive - quindi lettere, certo, ma anche brevi note, la sua produzione letteraria, avvisi, liste della spesa, eccetera) nell'arco di alcuni mesi. Un breve periodo che sembra rappresentare il culmine della disperazione per il protagonista: abbandonato un paio di anni prima dalla moglie, scappata a New York per fare l'attrice, fondatore, editore e solo collaboratore di una rivista letteraria, *Soap*, oggetto di scherno e derisione, proprietario di diversi edifici fatiscenti i cui affittuari sollecitano continuamente riparazioni, scrittore indefeso di lettere ai giornali della zona in cui si auto-incensa sotto falso nome, revisionista auto-illusivo della propria esistenza.

Il romanzo, come dicevo, è scritto davvero bene perché il protagonista ne esce davvero a tutto tondo nonostante gli evidenti limiti del formato scelto. Eppure, nonostante occasionalmente si provi tristezza per questo losco figuro, nella maggior parte dei casi è davvero difficile provare simpatia o anche solo un barlume di interesse per i suoi vaneggiamenti, atteggiamento a quanto pare condiviso da gran parte dei suoi interlocutori, che sembrano rispondere alle sue lettere solo vagamente.

*You see, there is nothing for me to do here anymore. I am embarking because I am bored, because I am frightened, because I am sad. But really because I don't find my jokes funny anymore. Looking back over them I ask myself if they were ever funny, or did I just make them see so by my laughter.*

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### **Josh Whittington says**

The Cry of the Sloth is one of the most uniquely structured books I've read. It's told through the writings of infamous author Andrew Whittaker; his letters, novel extracts and ad listings that are written over the course of four months. During this time we see Andrew's gradual decline in physical and mental health, as he tries to deal with editing a failing literary magazine and managing rental properties that are bleeding money. Andrew writes to his friends and enemies, though there's a very thin line between each of these categories, with some hilarious ramblings and writes snippets of his new novel that he swears is meant to be awful on purpose. You notice a shift in Andrew's writing as time passes, and there's some clever devices used to illustrate his state of mind. There's one point where you appear to be reading a letter to the editor of a magazine that is defending Andrew, only for it to quickly become apparent that he's writing it himself under a pseudonym.

You'll be conflicted about how to feel about Andrew, because on the one hand he's stuck in some awful situations that are taking a clear toll on his wellbeing but at the same time... he's a terrible person. His letters go on tangents that exist just to passively aggressively insult someone (often the recipient of the letter), he plays dangerous pranks on people like an undisciplined child, and he's a compulsive liar to the point where you wonder how honest he's really being about the events leading to his current circumstances. It's a really interesting book in that regard and I feel like it's one that will benefit from a rereading. There's a lot of subplots going on at once with each of Andrew's correspondents that sometimes link in with each other and with the extracts of Andrew's novels, so there's sure to be details that I've missed. It's a nice, short length that makes that more of an appealing prospect than a regular sized book would.

Your enjoyment will depend on how well you can tolerate an unlikeable protagonist. Andrew really is awful and that's sure to put a lot of people off, especially when the beginning of the book is a real slow and dry start. If you can endure that then there's a really interesting story being told, both in terms of content and presentation.

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### **Erwin Maack says**

Querido Rory,

Tremendos poemas. Os seus melhores até agora, especialmente aquele que começa com "Nascer da lua / A claraboia da mente se abre". Você tem períodos em que não consegue sair de casa? Sinto algo desse tipo no poema. Fez vibrar uma corda em mim, já que cada vez mais venho me sentindo assim, querendo ficar em casa, e simplesmente dizendo que se dane esse alvoroco todo, e então agradeço a deus pelas cortinas.

Tudo de bom.

Andy (página 153)

Querida Jolie,

Primeiro eram formigas, e agora são camundongos, ou talvez ratos. Não tenho certeza. Ouço os seus movimentos dentro das paredes, quando fazem barulho de raspar ou de mastigar, então podem ser tanto ratos

como camundongos. Acho que se fossem ratos seriam mais barulhentos, mas como estão dentro das paredes, não há como saber se o barulho que fazem é alto mesmo ou não. Será que ouço um camundongo bem de perto ou um rato mais de longe? Essa é uma pergunta, que, penso eu, a gente pode fazer a respeito de praticamente qualquer coisa.

O fato é que eu não quero mais isso. Em volta de mim tudo está se degradando, ou se rebelando. Se eu pelo menos pudesse sair de mim mesmo do jeito que alguém sai de uma casa! Adeus, meu velho. Adeus velha torradeira, velho sofá, velha pilha de revistas velhas. Ficar em pé na varanda, sentir a brisa fresca que vem da rua, senti-la soprando, atravessando-me. E, por último, iria embora a sujeira entupida em mim, que antes me fazia sentir quase sólido.

Andy (página 200)

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### **Israel Montoya Baquero says**

Lo primero de todo, decir que Savage se había puesto el listón muy, pero que muy alto con su anterior novela, "Firmin".

¿Estamos ante una obra de la misma categoría? Claramente, no. Para mi, este "Lamento del perezoso" está unos cuantos peldaños por debajo de la increíble historia de la rata lectora. ¿Quiere eso decir que estamos ante un mal libro? Pues...tampoco. Se deja leer con facilidad, el personaje de Andy es interesante (a ratos patético, capaz de generarnos sentimientos de pena y piedad; a ratos odioso, haciéndonos desear que muera pronto, o que desaparezca del mundo, el cual sería un lugar más bello y luminoso sin su presencia); un histriónico, fantasioso, y bueno para nada que lo único que quiere es vivir en paz y dedicarse a la buena literatura (siempre bajo su draconiana opinión, claro).

Un punto a favor de Savage es el hecho de no haber variado su fondo estilístico: al igual que ocurría en "Firmin", su prosa oscila entre episodios tiernos, divertidos, patéticos, pero que siempre están cubiertos por una más que interesante pátina de ironía, mal humor y cinismo.

En definitiva, NO es "Firmin", pero es una lectura más que satisfactoria.

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### **Tiffany says**

This book is about nothing. Really. It's a collection of documents written by the main character (journal entries, letters to friends, letters to tenants, grocery lists, etc.) that is meant to reveal the man's state of mind as he slowly admits that he is a failure professionally and personally.

The book is not "funny" or "touching" or "dark" or "outrageous." It's not "inspirational" or "a tale about rallying in the face of adversity" or "a peek" into anything. It's nothing. It's just a book about nothing. It's a book about a man with mediocre problems who has mediocre reactions to them and creates your run-of-the-mill mediocre drama with said problems.

It is entirely possible that this mediocrity is precisely what the author was trying to capture with this book. If so, congrats to Sam Savage...but the work did not appeal to me.

If you used to work on a literary mag or spent any time in an MFA program, you'll enjoy the first 25 pages or so. After that, consider stopping. Seriously. Don't read on because you're waiting "to see what happens." Nothing happens. Just put the book down and move on.

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## Lindsey says

There are two types of people who will really enjoy Sam Savage's "Cry of The Sloth". The first - those with literary aspirations struggling to balance 'real life' and writing - is a given, as it mirrors the plight of the novel's hero. The second type is the type that enjoys wanting to laugh and sob helplessly at the same time.

The novel is a "collection" of the "writings" of Andrew Whittaker, a sad, lonely man hung up on events of the past. We observe his one-sided conversations in letters to his ex-wife, who has moved away to become an actress; to other writers who have submitted pieces to his failing literary journal, now the laughing stock of the arts community in his area; letters he has written to that arts community under anagrammatic pseudonyms trumpeting his own talents and worth; to the unruly tenants of his crumbling real estate properties; to the phone company or the bank to appeal for some ease of financial burden. We are provided snippets of his prose poems, of his farcical novel, of his grocery lists. If the concept is gimmicky, it is no less entertaining. Whittaker as a character is hilariously snarky and deeply depressed, and that we are able to see this in every seemingly mundane bit of pen placed to paper is a feat of Savage's brilliant characterization.

The title of the novel comes from Whittaker's observation that, like the sloth, he has become "quite mossy" among other endearing parallels he's able to draw after reading about the sloth in a collection of encyclopedias detailing the lives of mammals. But Whittaker is battling something entirely human - to live a fulfilling creative life and be recognized for having done so, amid mounting chaos and ruin. As readers, we want Andrew to come through it, even as we relish his awkward attempts to do so and the misanthropic commentary that accompanies this.

My only complaint is that after pages and pages of a downward spiral, the novel ends abruptly with him giving up some of his creative aspirations. But we never find out what happens with his day-to-day plight. And it's hard to believe that even in his disappointment at having to set his dreams aside, he also stopped corresponding with everyone in his life. I think it must have been a challenge for Sam Savage to develop a plot entirely through letters, so I recognize that this "collected writing" is really a snippet of a writer going through a difficult period and then, somehow, moving on. But we don't get to see the full transformation, even after falling for such an engrossing character. Still, that the reader can be so absorbed in this character's life speaks highly to the novel's merits, however brief the book.

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## Grace says

Sam Savage's "The Cry of the Sloth" is the engrossing story of Andrew Whittaker - a never published author, shoddy landlord of decrepit properties housing even more decrepit tenants, the editor and sole staff member of the literary magazine Soap, and the ex-husband to a serial cheater who ends up involved with his writing nemesis.

Told mostly in letters written over a four month period by Andrew to various people: his ex-wife Jolie, his college roommate, a bevy of bill collectors, his tenants who refuse to pay rent or use garbage cans, writer friends from college who are successful and published authors, aspiring writers submitting material for publication, and various other people he has met along the way.

I found the letter format to be most engaging. It is the perfect vehicle for the author to show the complexity and contradictory aspects of Andrew's personality. He reveals himself, or a version of himself created specifically for the letter's recipient, in each letter. As the letters build, the reader is able to create a larger and more complete picture of the harried and downtrodden main character. It becomes evident early on that Andrew is either wholly unlikeable or not in touch with reality as he spirals into himself and out of reality as the recipients of his letters know it.

At times, Andrew is wholly unlikeable. This thought flashed through my brain on several occasions while reading the book; however, his slow descent into hell and his profound realizations of his life - hanging upside down like the sloth, waiting to forget to hold on so he can crash to the ground and his death, completely rehabilitated the narrator in my eyes. Sure, he spins webs of lies, but he tells them beautifully, in a voice so captivating and melodic that it is unbelievable that he is an unpublished author.

Overall, I enjoyed the book and I'm glad a friend recommended it to me. It is a quick read (barely 230 pages) and the melodic prose of Andrew's letters make the pages turn faster and faster the farther you get into the book. Sam Savage's way with words makes this a must read for any fiction writers out there looking to improve and hone their craft.

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### **Ana says**

i was torn between 3 and 4 stars. in the end it came down to three.. but it's more of a 3.5 ... it's in these times that i wish GR had another? more detailed rating system.

serious review to come.

### **three days later**

while here for writing a review, I'm still unsure about the rating. three or four? 3.5? what should it be? i guess we'll just have to go on without ever knowing this detail, as i'll leave the official rating a 3 stars and let you know that it might be a four. i'm so shady...

written in an epistolary manner, where the main character addresses letters to different people in his life, this book impressed me somewhere in its first part. honestly, i picked it up because i liked the cover of my edition, which was a white, skinny man with a black gas mask on, sitting at a desk and writing something, surrounded by a few objects, on a neutral background. i didn't expect anything mind-blowing about it, but I also didn't think i'd come up to be undecided upon its rating (which rarely happens after 3 years on GR, I rate books even before i finish them). so, imagine my surprise when i realised it was well written! i'm sure some other readers will say that's not true, that it doesn't really have value, but the truth is, if you compare it to most of today's literature, it does have exactly that.

the main character, Andrew, is really well described through the letters/documents he writes. you never get an accurate or real description of him in another way, but it's enough to see how he writes and who he sends his letters to in order to know him. Savage wrote a character who explained himself through writing.. the never-ending myth of seeing your true self on paper, i guess.

apart from Andrew being well written, nothing much happens in the book. he's just a desperate human being, seeking help and comfort wherever he can, and his tone varies from "i'm still ok with the world" to "that's it,

i'm taking my toys and i'm leaving".

still, even if it has no real action and you never see the character really *dealing* with anything, this book is a very good example of how characters can become the focus of a reader's eye. it was all about Andrew, and as a reader, i *wanted* it to be about him, i wanted to see how much he can reveal of himself through those letters.

i'm happy i took this book out of the library. t'was a good lecture, indeed!

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### **MJ Nicholls says**

A quite outrageously dreadful literary satire, so cringe-inducingly lame one wonders whether the noble Coffee House Press has any credentials at all, outside publishing the mighty Sorrentino. Sam Savage has read and met Sorrentino, which makes this novel doubly painful since what transpires is a sanitised, whimsified *Mulligan Stew*, centred around small lit-mag publisher Andrew Whittaker whose failing mag *Soap*, along with other sub-comedic sitcom disasters, precipitates a book-long nervous breakdown. The failure is tone. And approach. Written in a tiresome epistolary format (didn't Sorrentino kill that off in MS?), the lightly comedic antics fail since the reader isn't sure whether to pity or laugh at or root for Whittaker, and the bad writing samples suggest merely a laziness (hence the sloth title) but no delusional imagined talent like Antony Lamont, and frankly the humour in these samples (and the book) is so slight it effectively isn't there at all. Abandoned on p213 with violent disappointment. More people have (and will) read this than Sorrentino's masterpiece. Sad truth.

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### **Michelle says**

Oof, this is tough. This book was well-written and original, but geez, the main character is horribly pathetic and depressing. A never published author, Andrew Whittaker is instead the founder and editor of a struggling literary magazine, a landlord who is either lacking tenants or lacking good properties, and is divorced from a woman who, to be fair to him, sounds pretty selfish, but I can't really judge her because, hey, she had to live with this guy for how long? But the book is funny at the same time!

"Meanwhile, I have been practicing, and I believe I have learned to do a pretty good imitation of the sloth's cry. I place my thumbs firmly against the openings of my nostrils, blocking them completely. I then give a vigorous snort and at the same time fling both thumbs away from the nostrils in a decisive forward motion. The result is a woofling whistle which I imagine is quite close to what a young ai must sound like. I did it at the post office the other day when the clerk told me I had insufficient postage on my package. She was a mousy creature, so you can imagine the effect when I flung my thumbs from my nose in her direction and fired that noise at her." Ha! I don't care who you are--that's funny.

And seriously, the scene at the doctor's office when Andrew and the nurse are fighting over the twenty dollar bill is kind of perfect. From the second the nurse says, "That'll be twenty dollars," to Andrew's struggle to pull money from his pocket, to the money exploding out of his pocket leading to a mad scramble between the doctor, the nurse, and Andrew, to the nurse keeping a twenty, leading to an indignant Andrew demanding it back, the nurse getting it back after the doctor's intervention, then finally, finally Andrew giving it to the nurse with a dignified, "Here's the money I owe you," it is perfect and funny.

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### **Jacobmartin says**

I finished this last night - and I have to say I liked this for the same reasons I liked Welcome to the NHK by Tatsuhiko Takimoto. And by that I mean anything that says "funny but touching" on the back cover is without fail going to turn out to be a somewhat bleak black comedy like NHK was - no matter how funny the back of the book's blurb says.

So basically what I'm warning you about is not that this book is bad, it's just that the marketing for this character study of a novel is misleading. You have Andy Whittaker, a struggling novelist and publisher whose literary journal SOAP is failing and Andy's tenants are suffering under slumlord conditions. Andy is one of those characters where it's okay not to like him - the very fact that he's provoked a response in you at all is an achievement for any novel, much less a very good one like this by Sam Savage.

Sam Savage is the author of Firmin, a book I haven't read yet but I've heard it's good. I picked up The Cry Of The Sloth about two weeks ago - mainly out of curiosity about whether this would turn out to be one of those Catcher in the Rye type character study books only about writing.

The way it's told is in letters but pay attention to the prose parts that the character Andy writes because they reveal a fair bit about his inner struggles, did he or didn't he do that when he was younger - these types of questions arise when reading those parts.

I'd actually recommend this one not because it's funny but because despite what the book blurb says, it's not kidding around about the "touching" part. Some have compared this to A Confederacy of Dunces - only for the modern age since Andy is a very published writer who actually interacts with other people when he rages against society.

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### **Lilian says**

Protagonist is a hard-to-like loser who tries his best to keep his life and his literary magazine afloat, but events lead to an imminent breakdown.

I admire that the character still manages to be able to be verbose despite all that is happening to him, but he is a writer after all. This story reminds me of another "loser" novel Chump Change, and it also feels a bit like The Catcher in the Rye, then again, I guess any loser story has an element of J.D. Salinger's classic for me.

The choice of title is very apt. I will look it up just to fact-check that indeed that is how sloths cry, get depressed, and eventually die.

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### **Linda says**

I was informed that the narrator (and chief letter writer) Andy Whittaker was a character similar to Ignatius P. Reilly in The Confederacy of Dunces, so I read this book. Let's just say that Ignatius is much more endearing and literary, and leave it at that. Told entirely through letters, many of which it seems never get

sent, this is the unraveling of a middle aged professor and landlord. There are some truly funny moments, but mostly I was saddened by this tale of descent into madness.

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### **Maya Panika says**

This intriguing novel begins life as a comedy – a laugh-out-loud look at the fast-failing life of wannabe culture czar, Andrew Whittaker who runs ‘Soap’ a literary magazine from his home in a small town that he knows does not appreciate him.

Andrew’s slide into breakdown and madness is mostly told through letters, to a teenage would-be poet, to his disagreeable sister, to his ex-wife, recalcitrant tenants (I do not understand what you intend when you assert if I insist on the back rent you will be ‘forced to tell my husband’. Tell him what?) to an angry, rejected writer (‘Dear Dahlberg. I turned down your last submission due to its lack of merit and the fact that you are Canadian had nothing to do with it but if it makes you feel better to believe that, then go ahead...’). There are many self-penned, pseudonymed letters to the press about himself, a wonderful, misunderstood and greatly undervalued local genius, a ‘quiet, dignified, private man. The sort of emotional eruptions your reporter describes – shouting, ‘giving the finger’, throwing food and weeping – are outside the pale of his character.’

Brilliantly funny, touching and sad, Andy is a magnificent creation. In the words of Dyna Wreathkit in her letter to the editor of the ‘Current’, ‘Let those who hate him snicker, the rest of us will grieve.’

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### **Dolors says**

Four months of letters are more than enough to picture Andrew Whittaker's life in amazingly accurate detail , what it was, what it is and what it'll be when the last letter is sent.

As the editor of a little literary magazine which is about to disappear, he starts writing depressive letters to all his acquaintances and his family but in such a witty way that I found myself smiling in spite of the sad situation. Left by his wife, broken, and with no self esteem left, Andy's world starts to crumble and we witness his fast downfall to nowhere.

Sad, poignant and sarcastic, this is a seemingly light story which is finally charged with tones of existentialism , similar to Pessoa's Book of Disquiet.

Awesome surprise, insightful and intelligent reading.

"Lying, sycophantic, stupid. The ingratiating phrases. How can I be so loathsome?"

"I'm convinced their happiness is illusory. That is something I think you should know about me."

"I have unpacked my soul and there is nothing in it"

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### **Jason Pettus says**

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com: ]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

They say that in the arts, the projects we're most passionately drawn to are the ones that most accurately reflect our own true inner selves; so I'm not sure what exactly it says that one of my favorite types of novels are what I call "anti-villain" stories, in which our main character starts as a fairly likable if not strange person, but then has turned into a rather despicable monster by the end, usually through a combination of crippling self-delusion, a complete and utter lack of introspection, and even the inability to envision an external morality that doesn't bend and warp to justify their every personal whim. And indeed, I suspect that one of the reasons I like such novels so much is precisely because they subvert the usual expectations of the Western-Civ three-act narrative structure, in which usually our main character is someone we can legitimately root for as the story progresses -- for other excellent examples of anti-villain stories, see my past reviews of Michael Fitzgerald's *Radiant Days*, Kevin Shay's *The End As I Know It*, and Tod Wodicka's *All Shall Be Well...*, which is so great that it still sometimes randomly pops up in my head when I'm not expecting it.

And I have to say, such stories don't get much more dryly funny if not cringe-inducing than Sam Savage's *The Cry of the Sloth*, the latest by this already popular Wisconsinite (his previous *Firmin* was lauded by both the American Library Association and Barnes & Noble's "Discover Great New Writers" program, even more astounding in that Savage was in his late sixties at the time), a book virtually perfect for the overhyping literary enthusiast in your life because of it making such vicious fun of such people. And it's even more remarkable in this case for not being told in a traditional contemporary way at all, but rather in the outdated "epistolary" style of storytelling, where instead of descriptions and dialogue the entire tale is related through a series of written letters; one-way letters in this case, all of them emanating from one Andrew Whittaker, in an unspecified Midwestern state in the pre-internet 1970s. Turns out that Whittaker is the long-suffering editor of the pathetically unpopular *Soap* literary journal, whose grandness in his eyes clashes badly against the joke status it obviously occupies with nearly everyone else around him; what this book consists of, then, is basically a series of letters that Whittaker issues forth from his inherited crumbling Victorian home which serves as *Soap* headquarters -- letters to contributors, letters to his ex-wife and former school chums, letters to the deadbeat tenants of the run-down apartment building he owns and refuses to keep in decent shape, even such internal memos as shopping lists and first-draft excerpts from his supposedly brilliant new novel-in-progress (which as you can imagine is actually execrable, a plain fact to everyone but Whittaker himself).

And indeed, much like Eric Bogosian's *Perforated Heart* (which now that I think about it, is an anti-villain story as well), the most joyful and telling aspect of *Sloth* is not really anything that Whittaker actually says, but all the unspoken messages that lie behind the way that the people around him *react* to what he says, which is what makes its epistolary format so clever, because Savage is able to build up layer upon layer of both insight and humor through such means. Just for one good example, look at the letter he writes early in the book to a woman he once had a one-night-stand with at a weekend book convention, and how surface-level funny his overwrought prose is when describing the torrid tryst ("Salient against the dark of your summer tan, your breasts are turning green and red, semaphores flashing in the dark night of memory"), wondering aloud whether they should actually give love another shot now that she's left her "loser husband;" so it's even funnier, then, when in his next letter to her twenty pages later, he is apologizing for not realizing that she had actually reconciled with said husband, and even funnier still in a third letter when he becomes confused over her almost opposite recollection of their weekend affair, completely failing to understand how she could think of it as "a very young and very frightened girl trapped in a squalid motel room with a bullying neurotic."

It's ultimately details like this that ends up making *Sloth* such an effective anti-villain story, instead of simply a funny novel about a self-deluded loser; because as the book continues, his self-delusions and selective memory start turning more and more disturbing and sometimes outright evil. And that's what makes Savage so brilliant an author, because he so deftly walks us down that road from the expected to the unexpected; in

the first half, for example, all my fellow fans of the underground arts are sure to knowingly smile at the ridiculously optimistic expectations Whittaker has for his coming "Words On Fire National Literary Conference and Festival" (which he envisions featuring a town parade with elephants, giant paper-mache puppets of classic authors made by local schoolchildren, and guest of honor Norman Mailer), while by the end we are literally cringing at the letters he is writing to the local newspaper under fake names, attempting to defend in third person his recent drunken misogynistic brawl at the county fair against his longtime rival, the genteel housewife-run fellow local lit journal *The Art News*. It's effectively Savage having his cake and eating it too, presenting us lit fans with an all-too-familiar figure -- the arts administrator much better at marketing than at actually producing, who falsely fawns all over the people he is trying to get something from, then instantly turns on them when the attempt fails -- but then by the end ratcheting up this figure's behavior to well beyond the boundaries of most of the people you'll find in the typical poetry scene or academic environment.

It produces by the end a really engaging thing, an uncomfortably astute cautionary tale that by the end reaches over-the-top status; and that of course is what makes *The Cry of the Sloth* so entertaining when all is said and done, precisely because Savage eventually takes things to such a dramatic level, proving the old adage that good literature is essentially reality pushed to ridiculous extremes. It comes highly recommended today, and is a great addition in my opinion to the general anti-villain canon.

Out of 10: **9.3**

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### **Kristi Lamont says**

I very rarely say anything like this, but in this case it seems warranted: I have to wonder if I would have enjoyed this book more if I were a straight white middle-aged man. Who had completed an MFA but not a novel. While watching his seemingly less-talented peers achieve both literary and popular success. Definitely some witty bits, and the story was engaging enough on some level to keep me reading all the way to the end, but overall this book seemed forced/too clever by half. Well, that's what you get sometimes when you pick up a book at random in the library -- something I'm (still) trying to do more of this year. And, of course, my hat's off to Mr Savage and others who actually write books instead of just reacting to them.

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### **Sam says**

What a strange little novel. I liked it very much (I think). Andy is so cynical and bitter and self pitying and pathetic. Parts of it are bitterly funny. It isn't the sort of book you read and finish with a good feeling. It is about writing I guess. And a horribly damaged and disappointed persons struggles and loneliness. I'm not sure about the ending though.

I do empathize with Andy as a character in some ways. I feel like we might have been friends if he was a real person. The novel sort of chronicles a man's decline as a small town writer and Creative Person (tm) and his struggles against pretty much everyone else, most people who he seems to think a philistines (I like this bit particularly).

I think this a dangerous sort of book to take at face value because I often feel bitter about things the way Andy does too. Perhaps the novel is a lesson in how not to end up. Andy lets his bitterness and regret become

a psychosis which effectively consumes him. Which is sad.

I do love his pretension, right through the book he remains mostly committed to this which I think is so important to life generally, though obviously in Andy's case he is self destructive and neurotic. I wanted to grab him and shake by the shoulders and tell him to pull himself together.

The ending isn't precisely what I was expecting but perhaps in reflection that's a good thing and exactly what an ending should be. If it resolves in an substantial way I don't think it would be true to life, it does feel though a bit like the author was forced to come up with something quickly, I'm not sure the ending followed the flow of the rest of the book.

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### **Angela says**

Andy Whittaker is a character straight out of a Todd Solondz movie, and at the same time the book made me realize why Todd Solondz makes movies instead of epistolary novels. Whittaker is basically failing at life, writing letters attempting to reconnect with his uninterested ex-wife, creepily attempting to hook up with the teenage girl submitting poetry to his literary magazine, composing long dispatches to his bill collectors explaining how much he values their services and wishes he could pay them, and even praising himself in letters to the editor written in pseudonymity.

My gripe here isn't with the writing or Savage's success at portraying Whittaker. He does an excellent job. And that just may be the problem--the sad fact of the matter is that Whittaker just isn't very interesting. His ex-wife and his sister and his bill collectors and his old buddies from college don't want anything to do with him, and by the end of the novel, neither do we. I'm no enemy of an unsympathetic main character - I can read *Notes from Underground* over and over and I wasn't one of those obnoxiously chipper people who can't understand why McEwan's *Amsterdam* won the Booker instead of *Atonement*. But the one-sided epistolary format is a formidable challenge that, even when done right, is difficult to pull off. Thus the two stars, or really it would be two and a half if I could.

Still, Savage does a wonderful job of capturing Andy's descent, and I can't wrap this up without sharing some particularly striking passages:

Their affair lasted for seven weeks. Even now I can recall in excruciating detail, as if it were yesterday, listening as if transfixed to the gasps and cries from the bedroom, five feet from where I sat at the kitchen table staring at my face in my coffee. It was part of the ideology of the time that this sort of behavior was normal, even desirable, and to keep myself from wailing in agony I would stuff my mouth full of bread. When they would leave off at last and emerge glistening with sweat to join me in the kitchen, I would turn away to the sink as if to draw a glass of water, and there I would let the bread dribble quietly from my mouth, forcing it down the drain with a spoon, while they sat down at the table and spread jam on theirs.

(which may just be the best cuckolding passage I've read) And when Whittaker is asked to check boxes on a form:

Marital status, for example. There I just had to take a wild guess. Also the question, "Do you consider yourself innocent?" Here we have a question which kept Kafka and Dostoevsky, to name just two, on the mat, not to mention Kierkegaard, and you want *me* to check "Yes" or "No"? I puzzled over that one for hours before hitting on what I thought at the time was a satisfactory solution. But on reflection I now think that checking both boxes was probably more confusing than helpful.

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