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Skimmings

the lamp post motel

By Joe Gold (Dailey Swan, \$14.95)

Tucson's Lamp Post Motel, once a flamboyant turquoise and coral anchor on South Craycroft Road near the entrance to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, departed the Tucson phone book after 1994.

Today, it's back in a comic science fiction novel, "The Lamp Post Motel." It was written by the builder's son, Joe Gold, a former Tucsonan now living in San Francisco. It is reminiscent of Charles G. Finney's famous urban fantasy, "The Circus of Dr. Lao," also set in Tucson almost 75 years ago.

In the novel, the Lamp Post's owner/operator is a grieving widower named Elmo Skinner. Its newest check-ins are two goof-offs from outer space.

It is a blistering August day in the 21st century when Xaq and Yot, 42nd-century graduate students from a second-rate university on one of Saturn's rings, slip through a time warp and pilot their bubble spacecraft to the Lamp Post's parking lot.

Their purpose is twofold. Xaq is to study human sex patterns in pre-radioactive Earth (In 4157, Earth is known around the universe as the "Garbage Planet"). Yot is to deposit \$10,000 in a savings account which, when they return to Saturn, will have racked up enough interest in the intervening 2,000 years to make them rich. (Some things don't change much from millennia to millennia.)

Gold, who has a nice ear for dialogue and clearly wants to say a lot, suffers from a problem of many new novelists: too much plot.

The major plot engine is mind transference.

Elmo has brightened the days since the death of his wife and child by wiring several Lamp Post rooms for sight and sound so he can monitor guests' activities. The Saturnians do him one better and plunk poor old Elmo down in the heads of several characters, including an internationally famous man-hater, Thea Nikolas. How Elmo and Thea resolve their dilemma is the heart of the novel.

J.C. Martin

thirteen moons

By Charles Frazier (Random House, \$26.95)

"There is no scatheless rapture."

Thus begins Charles Frazier's second novel, leaving no doubt what readers are in for. Now is the time, according to taste, to gratefully turn back or to gleefully plunge into the land of historical romance.

There is a grandly flawed and expressive hero, Will Cooper, sold off by his aunt and uncle as a boy and thrown into a beautiful but dying Cherokee culture.

There are his exploits as senator/colonel/Indian chief, both within said nation and without, as he masters the wilds of the Southern mountains and the wiles of Washington, D.C.

There is betrayal and bloodshed and camaraderie around the campfire, where Will cooks up a mean meal, augmented by fine literature and wine.

There are Calhoun, Crockett and the Civil War, augmented by a host of other characters and broadly

rendered set pieces.

And, of course, there is a woman, physically spectacular and psychologically blank — a perfect fit for one of the fine actresses who will, no doubt, soon be vying for the role.

Claire comes and goes in Will's life without much explanation. She's prone to irritatingly cryptic comments and unfortunately timed disclosures.

But these particulars get lost in the greater wash of the novel, which strains after the epic with unfortunate results. Frazier is constantly overwriting, ladling on too many side plots and embarrassing love scenes.

The Associated Press

haiku mama

By Kari Anne Roy (Quirk Books, \$12.95)

"Haiku Mama" had two barriers to overcome: One, it's a small gift book, and two, it's a book of poetry about motherhood, both of which tend to be overly precious.

But the brief odes to puddles, toys, baby pools, sippy cups and play dates are charming, pointed and funny, a perfect, unsentimental gift for new moms.

Moms tend to read in short bursts. In her collection of 100 poems, Kari Anne Roy manages to share universal experiences with motherhood and childhood in a concise, unique way.

The Seattle Times

ego and hubris

By Harvey Pekar and Gary Dumm (Ballantine, \$19.95)

Pekar, the subject of the film "American Splendor," writes autobiographical comics, but his latest offering deviates from previous titles. It's a first-person biography of a character named Michael Malice; frequent collaborator Dumm provides the simple, effective art. Malice is a self-satisfied libertarian who disdains all forms of government subsidy, almost the exact opposite of Pekar, a retired federal employee with less than stellar self-esteem.

What they have in common is a powerful sense of self and of their unshakable notions of right and wrong. As thoroughly obnoxious and repugnant as Malice might be, Pekar's script, which knits several chapters of the subject's life into a narrative, conveys a charmingly misunderstood, incompetently parented wonder boy.

McClatchy-Tribune

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