

★ **The Caricaturist: The American Novels**

Norman Lock

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Set in 1897, Norman Lock's riveting historical novel *The Caricaturist* focuses on Oliver, a Philadelphia native and a student at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Uninspired by the academy's faculty of "myopic old men," Oliver yearns for more modern modes of success. He and his bohemian friends rent rundown garrets, smoke hashish, and have rousing artistic discussions.

But among the faculty is realist painter Thomas Eakins, who depicts the human form with masterful detail. Eakins is accused of being a degenerate "sodomite" due to his paintings of nude young men. He becomes a reluctant mentor to Oliver, offering the exasperated advice that Oliver's "sophomoric" self-absorption keeps him from creating meaningful artwork.

Beyond Oliver's art school adventures looms the threat of the Spanish-American War. As potential draftees, Oliver and his friends have little interest in fighting for "pineapples and Domino sugar." Still, Oliver takes a job as a newspaper illustrator and caricaturist and, through this employment and other leveling experiences, becomes more contemplative and less self-centered. When he is assigned to work with author and war correspondent Stephen Crane, he travels to Florida and becomes involved in the conflict after all. Aboard the gunrunner *The Three Friends*, "scapegrace" Oliver surprises even himself by acting with a "modicum of courage."

Oliver's narration is raffish at first, but it evolves over the course of the novel. He observes steamy Chinatown restaurants, narrow Trinity houses, Philadelphia bustling with rattling trolleys, churning newspaper presses, and fiery war protests in a memorable way. And the book's cavalcade of historical details is exuberant too, with cameos from Mark Twain, Andrew Carnegie, William Jennings Bryan, and Clara Barton.

The captivating and energetic historical novel *The Caricaturist* rollicks through a turbulent American epoch via an artist's coming-of-age.

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