



Going To See the Elephant

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On a windy September day, twenty-five-year-old Slater Brown stands in the back of a bicycle taxi hurtling the wrong way down the busiest street in San Francisco. Slater has come to “see the elephant,” to stake his claim to fame and become the greatest writer ever. But this city of gleaming water and infinite magic has other plans in this astounding first novel—at once a love story, a feast of literary imagination, and a dazzlingly original tale of passion, ambition, and genius in all their guises...

Slater Brown lays siege to San Francisco like Achilles circling Troy—until he crashes headlong into reality. Out of money and prospects, he applies for a job at a moribund weekly newspaper called the *Morning Trumpet*—and, as if by fate, is given a very special parting gift from a moonlighting mystic.

Suddenly Slater has an exclusive on every story in the city. With his uncanny knack for finding scoops, he’s bringing the *Trumpet* back to life, infuriating a corrupt mayor and falling in love with the woman destined to become his muse. But it is the astonishing inventor Milo Magnet—a man obsessed with harnessing the weather—who will force Slater to navigate the most dangerous straits.

For as Milo unleashes his power on San Francisco and the ravishing Callio de Quincy entrances Slater with hers, as storm clouds gather *literally* overhead, Slater will become at once a pawn, a savior, and the last best hope for a city that needs him—and his knack for the truth—more than ever before.

From the Hardcover edition.

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From Reader Review Going To See the Elephant for online ebook

Aaron Hand says

Meh. I nicked this off my mom's bookshelf during a recent visit, attracted by the title. It should've been a quick, easy read, but I wasn't all that motivated to finish it. The author seems mostly interested in crafting witty little turns of phrases rather than telling a decent story.

Bob H says

This is an enjoyable, bouncy ride through a San Francisco that evokes the City as it always has been, vivid, eccentric, lively from its Gold Rush days, rather than a Tales of the City contemporary satire. It's the story of young Slater Brown, who lands in San Francisco a penniless, aspiring writer and ends up on a loopy, eccentric paper, the Trumpet, which itself is the latest in an old, raucous school of San Francisco journalism going back to the days of Samuel Clemens, and still very much alive in the City's free weekly tabloids (indeed, the Trumpet, here, first changes publishers in the Gold Rush, at the point of a .44). Only natural that Slater's new bosses at the Trumpet seem to be Marx Brothers doing film noir.

The story's deus ex machina, a small radio that can pick up conversations through the bus-trolley wires, provides Slater with his scoops. All he has to do is ride the trolley buses day after day, and so doing, hands the Trumpet its sudden revival. Both the medium -- the City's ubiquitous electric buses -- and the messenger, a mysterious Answer Man soothsayer who gives Slater the radio, are very San Francisco. The scoops quickly become the bane of the City's Mayor, Tucker Oswell, who seems to be the exemplar of all the City's more flamboyant mayors (think of Sunny Jim Rolph of the 1920s, on steroids, or maybe a fat Gavin Newsom), and a power struggle begins.

Throw in a dotty society heiress, a not-so-mad scientific inventor, a female chess grandmaster who becomes Slater's love interest, and her father, a wealthy and somewhat mad recluse, and you have the sort of bigger-than-life characters that the City has always had, from the days of the Emperor Norton. Add surreal weather, municipal scandals and a climactic chess battle with a laptop, all of it bathed in "the peculiar end-of-the-world light known only to San Francisco" (which is true) and you have a bizarre story that takes you on a hilarious ride.

The chess tournament takes place under the City Hall dome, and this author is the first one I've heard characterize the dome as a Faberge egg. (After it was redecorated by former Mayor Willie Brown in the 1990s, with an enamel and gold finish on the outside, I myself had wondered who would spot the resemblance. In the City's peculiarly golden light.)

And the prose is amusing in its own right. "In order to find even these minor scoops [Slater] had endured endless banality: snippets of boring chitchat between shop girls, of promises whispered between consenting adults to people they were not married to, of minor treason, of pathetic business schemes dreamed up by small-minded, of unrequited love, and of terrible meanness. And that was just while passing the Transamerica Pyramid on the number 4."

Great fun.

Michael Holland says

I had to read this for a graduate class, and half way through I was confused. The plot is a bit slow, even though it is an easy read. There's only one interesting character in the book, and that character is the love interest. Her role becomes predictable towards the end due to plot twist. Ironic for a novel to be based in San Francisco, where the city happens to take on the role of a character itself, that you so zero gay people. The novelist even wrote the novel based on his time living in San Francisco, so I just find that odd. Besides that, it is very readable, mostly because it is simplistic. Entertaining at best!

Kelly says

I can assure you, there is nothing better than coming upon a book, after so many tried and faulty reads, that actually is an honest one. Going to See the Elephant is an ingenious work of art, a colorful innocent tapestry of The City and what can happen if you listen to your intuition inside of it. Fishburne's Slater Brown is a wickedly funny character that wound me around his little finger so neatly, I couldn't help loving the little bugger.

Slater's journey began when he emerged from behind his "innkeepers" house and walked the streets, scribbling in the streetcars and jotting down whatever he heard in his mind or on paper. Of course, being in a city as large and expensive as San Francisco, Slater is what we jokingly call a "starving artist" which is not entirely a fairytale for the best of us writers, but still a laughable subject.

But here, in the beginning, Slater was unheard of, lonesome and searching for work. And the before and after shots of his writing career seem to be infused with a raucous band, trumpets and all, I could almost detect the 1930's in his gait and the air of The City. Not only were the characters colorful, they were also colorfully, ridiculously real. My eyes dribbled joy because it was so true, the banter that we fall through to get our points across.

And if I didn't know any better, Slater sounded like he held more than a fragment of Fishburne himself (which is an interesting subject of interest with me, the voice of the book is the soul of the writer, or at least it should be anyways). My apologies to Fishburne, but it made me love the story all the more to think that the author might have gone through many of Slater's adventures, giving him a falcon's eye view of that rabbit below, the thing we call life.

Mac Daly says

An ok read

When young Slater Brown arrives in San Francisco he's determined to become the best writer in the world. Thus begins a tale of superlatives. There's the richest woman, the most beautiful girl, and the most brilliant man. Unfortunately none of these "most" characters is very interesting. And though the author seems to like San Francisco, he doesn't give the people who live there much credit.

Tricia says

Slater Brown comes to San Francisco to get something published for eternity. He is the greatest writer in the world. The only problem is that publishing for eternity doesn't pay well, and he hasn't published anything yet.

Throw in a chess genius, an "Answer Man" with a dodgy radio, a mayor with an eating disorder and a mad scientist playing with the weather and you have the pieces of the book that forms the story.

The book had a touch of early Tom Robbins for me with wild characters and separate stories that come together. The book was an easy read but not earth shattering.

Paula says

Some fantastical moments, some eye-rolling moments, some very humorous moments (especially concerning the Mayor of San Francisco character), but not much that made me want to keep reading. I did finish it, however, and would not rule out sampling more works by this author.

Cindy says

Rodes Fishburne's novel Going To See The Elephant is part comedy, part love story and part fable, all set in present-day(ish) San Francisco. Our hero, Slater Brown, arrives in the big city with a few dollars in his pocket, a steamer trunk full of books by the greats and an ambition to become a great writer himself. We know nothing of Slater before he comes to San Francisco and the reader wonders what it was, exactly, that led him to choose the City By the Bay as his destination. On a personal note, I was pleased that this wasn't another New York tale.

Slater is soon out of money and his best efforts to write the great American novel come to nothing, despite days- days, I say!- spent tucked away in the back corner of a seedy tavern scribbling madly in notebooks. He cons his way into a job at the city's black sheep newspaper and through a chance meeting with an odd mystic soon learns all the city's dirtiest secrets. Slater's modern muckraking resurrects the dying Morning Trumpet and establishes Slater as a celebrity, as well as the sworn enemy of the Boss Tweed of a city mayor. Add to the mix a maternal landlady, an exotic chess champion, two old school newspapermen straight out of the thirties, and a not-so-mad scientist who can bend the forces of nature to his will and you have what must be described as a fun read. This is Fishburne's debut novel, and promises a bright future for the author.

Marieke says

A silly, silly waste of time. I was bored enough to consider not finishing it. I don't think it would have made much of a difference if I hadn't.

Slater Brown goes to San Francisco to seek his fortune as a writer; ends up writing for a newspaper; meets a girl; discovers himself along the way. Oh yeah, and there are tornadoes. I discovered that I didn't much care.

A few notable images caught me -- the grime-encrusted *Trumpet* (the newspaper) building with its clock that stopped in the earthquake of 1906. The network of electric bus wires covering the city like a live net. Two people rowing out to Alcatraz on a date and getting caught in the fog.

But the moments I savored were far outnumbered by those things that made me cringe. *Everything* in Fishburne's world is superlative. Slater's goal in life is to be the best writer in the entire history of the universe. Callio is on her way toward being chess champion of the world. Milo is the smartest living man on the planet. And so on. Tiring.

This exaggerated swagger doesn't make the story come to life. Quite the opposite. The characters are flat, like paper dolls. Slater's most distinguishing characteristic is that he dresses like a dandy. He's a 'writer' who can't write. Actually, he's an adolescent boy in a young man's body. He's an idiot.

In walks Callio -- the most beautiful woman he's ever seen. Wow. Now there's a novel concept.

I kept thinking that perhaps the quaint landlady or the mad scientist were in the story for a reason... that perhaps their connections with Slater, or their presence in the story, would turn out to be important to the plot...

How wrong I was.

No number of tornadoes, alien fireball attacks, ghostly disembodied voices, or evil corpulent mayors (yes, these all make an appearance) can change the fact that this isn't much of a story. It's a list of things that might have happened to some people that we hardly know.

And I don't want to know them. I wouldn't offer Slater Brown my shirtsleeve to wipe his snot on. Callio as a pinnacle of feminine perfection is not real enough to admire. Milo... mad scientist. Stereotypes all.

I don't require a book to have a plot, but I do need it to have something compelling about it, something meaningful or intriguing or mysterious or significant, whether it's the characters, the voice, the writing or the world the author creates. Something that draws me in and makes me FEEL.

Fishburne can string words together but he can't make me feel anything but annoyance that I bought his book.

Edwin Arnaudin says

"Going to See the Elephant" feels like Rodes Fishburne read Thomas Pynchon's "The Crying of Lot 49," found it quirky but too weird, and wrote a more accessible translation. The quirkiness remains (it is the guiding strength of Fishburne's first novel) and because the story is less rooted in LSD, it comes off as far more whimsical yet simplistic. For example, "Elephant" protagonist Slater Brown writes for *The Daily Trumpet*, certainly a reference to the *Trystero* muted post horn from "Lot 49," but Fishburne's drugs are administered in a much lighter dose than Pynchon's. It's for the better, but makes you wonder what you're missing.

Distracted by the whimsy of Fishburne's San Francisco and the youthful energy of Brown, there never seems to be real conflict besides Slater finding his place as a writer. As with "Lot 49," threats never seem to impact the characters and relationship issues feel inconsequential, though we can tell that characters are affected by love and loss. Even the supposed "madman" doings of the genius Milo Magnet, whose laboratory work

passages are tantalizing, feel cartoonish as opposed to apocalyptic.

But the whimsy is more than enough to command attention and generate a quick read. Fishburne never quite builds on the brilliant insight of would-be writers that he explores in the first 30-40 pages and lets his characters off a little too easy, but his world is far from dull.

Nese says

I didn't know what to make of the first thirty or so pages of this book because there is no information about the main character who seems to be a blank slate. (The author explains the reason behind that at the end of the book where Q & A section is.) Am I glad I didn't give up on reading it. After the first three chapters, I was unable to put the book down because I was so curious where the story was going and I was so emotionally involved with the characters. Not only the book combines so many genres such as "coming-of-age, science fiction/fantasy, satire, and romance", and "many of the characters in the novel are fascinating figures: mad scientist, the gluttonous mayor, the brilliant and beautiful chess player", but what I liked about the most is its vivid description of the personalities and their inner worlds. Although the story is fast-paced and multifaceted, it evolves gradually and naturally with so many twists and turns. It is funny, entertaining, lighthearted, and romantic in a realistic way, and the story is told from a hopeful, optimistic, and focused view point, one has when one is very young. This is such a delightful, creative, and original style of writing; I hope there will be more books written by this author available in the future. (I have a correction though: Turkish people are descendants of nomadic tribes from Central Asia and are not Arabic origin, unlike the book states one of the characters from Turkey having Moorish descendants.) Five stars all around.

Ary Chest says

Reading this was in part my effort to support local author. In my case, it's San Francisco. It's sad that one of the most innovative cities in the world doesn't have much of an art scene or industry. Lots of people here like to pretend its super creative, but, in reality, nothing incredibly reputable has been produced from within the city limits since the beat poetry movement. In the 80's and 90's, there was a sizable community of L.G.B.T.Q. literary geeks who published, but they never hit the mainstream, or the minor mainstream.

Okay, so onto Rodes Fisburne's novel and him reppin' the city by the bay. He's actually pretty big, for a San Francisco writer. A published novel that is mildly successful and, his most recent achievement, creating a legit TV show Blood and Oil. His first and, to date, only novel, Going to See the Elephant, is about a guy trying to make it as a writer in San Francisco, and, in order to get a career in his desired field, he takes up a job at an odd publication with a cast of quirky characters. Not the best premise, but I can still roll with it.

I can see why a lot of other people don't like this novel. Yes, it is kind of cliche and boring at times. Yes, the plot is a little ridiculous. But, I'm a sucker for fun, light reads. I know Going to See the Elephant suffers from the same problem a lot of urban chick-lit novels suffer from; being set in an city that's depicted as nothing like the real thing, mostly a kind that helps a stranger rise to the top quickly and too easily. Hey, it makes for good escapism lit.

Going to See the Elephant is a fun, entertaining read, that's also pretty good at being comedic. For that, I can give it three stars.

If this was supposed to be more literary, then this is what Fisburne needed improvement. It was trying a lot

to be like Armestaud Maupin's *Takes of the City*. Maupin's work was written and published at the peak of San Francisco's legendary's radical weirdness, when it was expected to meet strange, interesting people who like helping each other out. This book is set in contemporary San Francisco, and much of the plot elements do read as a little dated. I saw an interview with Fishburne which he said he had the idea in 2003. A lot happened to his beloved city between that time and 2009, when *Going to See the Elephant* was published. Just moving and landing a job as a writer, even if it's at a dumb company, is too implausible. 2009 was when this country was still recovering from a crash. Not even people with master's degrees in journalism could get jobs. If that had been incorporated into the plot, it would've been much more rich.

As for the writer character himself, Slater was a bit flat and unlikable. So were the other characters around him who seemed to serve no more purpose than to contribute to Slater's life and move the plot along.

Some strong points were the information on newspapers and descriptions of San Francisco. I loved those.

Hopefully, one day, we can look back and say Rodes Fishburne paved the way for San Francisco to become a literary giant again.

Sarah Anderson says

I do love a novel chock-full of good quirkiness. And *Going To See The Elephant* delivers - sometimes, in excess. It took me a while to actually finish this book, because until Callio, the champion female chess player, becomes a more featured part of the story, I didn't care as much about Slater Brown, our atypical hero of the action. He's fun, harmless, and affects a lot of quirks, but compared to the Mayor or the other newspaper reporters, or even the landlady, his quirks are forced. I understand that those affected, forced quirks are a part of him not knowing who he is and what he's doing, but it didn't draw me in initially.

I never did figure out the role of Brooke - it was implied that there was something sinister about Slater's run-in with her, but that sinister machination never saw the light of day again. And while Milo Magnet was quirk at its finest, I felt his role in the story was overdrawn and took too much time away from Slater's development.

But, you'll note, I gave this four stars because, despite those nit-pick complaints, this was just darned fun to read. Fishburne's observation of detail is poetry in sentence form, and the ending was deeply satisfying. As an aspiring author who tries to work in flowery, literary observations, I completely associated with Slater as he tries to just get the words in the right order!

Colleen says

I wasn't sure what to expect from this book, but it was a delight from start to finish. Slater Brown is an unlikely hero, a writer convinced he could be the world's best writer if only he could get the right words on the page in the right order. He considers himself well-read, though his efforts are limited to the first sentences of great books from which he extrapolates the quality of the rest of the unread work. Despite his many eccentricities, Slater Brown's love for San Francisco, for the rhythms of the city, lend him an unexpectedly endearing quality.

As Slater's writing takes off, he becomes beloved by the citizens of the city he loves- the ultimate reward for any journalist. His optimism in the face of overwhelming odds is a marked contrast to the rest of the staff on his newspaper, but they gradually come to share his positive outlook for the future. When his efforts to please both his love and his readers collide, Slater must face fundamental questions about the core of his being that lead him to uncomfortable answers.

This book is a quirky and interesting coming of age tale. Fishburne is a master storyteller, and I'll certainly be recommending this novel to others. 4.5 stars.

Kevin says

Funny, sweet, a love letter to San Francisco. The best thing written about this city since "Tales of the City."
