

A literary novel set in contemporary San Francisco. Highly atmospheric, often lyrical, Emperor's Reach intertwines psychological drama with history, humor, romance and suspense. Filled with quirky, memorable characters, it's an insightful portrait of a real charmer who hides his narcissism as he tries to manipulate others and control his world.

EMPEROR'S REACH: A Novel of San Francisco

by Eric E. Wallace

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A Novel of San Francisco

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Eric E. Wallace

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With the exception of Emperor Norton, the characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to other real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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His street people always kept him a little off balance. One moment totally unfocused or completely irrational, one moment lucid. Their conversation—if that's what you could call it—might range from bizarre to profound, from supplicating to sly. Darrol found it entertaining. Unsettling but entertaining.

He remembered talking to Jeepers Peepers a few months back. JP was perched on a broken shipping crate, staring vacantly at the world. The famous Thinker statue, San Francisco style.

As usual, Perro Caliente was sitting bug-eyed at JP's feet. This dog was the least-hyper Chihuahua Darrol had ever seen, practically comatose. PC's tongue hung out like a beggar's tin cup. Darrol wanted to drop a dime onto it just to see what would happen. Something, no doubt, in canine slow motion.

But he had nothing for the dog that day, coin or otherwise. Instead he offered JP a treat wrapped in tinfoil. The man's big eyes flared even wider behind his cracked spectacles. He grabbed at the offering, dropped the foil onto the sidewalk and regarded the slice of currant bar like a museum specimen.

"Pride," Peepers said. "First thing to go. Out here. And then..."

He took a speculative bite, savored the taste. "Raisins? Cockroaches? No matter." He chewed slowly. He tilted his head looked at Darrol. "What was...?"

"You were talking about pride, pride going," Darrol said, not really expecting JP to pick up the thread. But the guy did.

"Yeah. I had thoughts." JP chewed. "This cockroach is fine. What? Oh, pride. You see, it comes back, Jack." He stared at Darrol. The Chihuahua was gawping up also, waiting for the first crumb to fall.

"You lose it, but then a different brand comes along. Street pride. I got pride, street pride. Don't you forget it." JP's tone stopped just short of hostile.

"No," Darrol said. "I'm with you, JP. We've all got our brands of pride."

A loud squawking slashed through Darrol's thoughts. The goddam parrots again. Darrol was in the transition zone between Nob Hill and Russian Hill. Let the realtors battle which block was really which and skyrocket the prices accordingly. You step across just one slab of sidewalk, across just one crack really, and property values shift gears bigtime.

But the damn parrots didn't care which hill they were on. They were busy infesting.

Supposedly years back the birds started out near Telegraph Hill. Some idiot let his pet escape. At first only an innocent screech or two in the neighborhood, jungle lovebirds screwing happily in good old San Francisco. Then more and more—oh how cute!—but now there are flocks, and they have the run of the place. People even put out food for the things.

Darrol fed his street people. But he'd never feed these birds. He'd like to wring every feathery little neck. When he'd moved to the Hill and first noticed them, he admired the bright cherry heads and the lime-colored bodies, thought their swooping antics were fun. But soon he found that they annoyed him. They were a total blight. They fluttered and screamed, filled the eucalyptus trees with bickering, destroyed the calm of his walks.

But it wasn't just that. He envied their freedom, their insouciance—another word he loved, although he regretted that it applied to the parrots—and they mocked him. This was his territory, and he hated intruders beyond his control. He cheered on any hawk or cat who got one of the bastards.

As he quickly moved to the next block, the parrots behind him screamed goodbye. He resisted screaming back.

In front of him, a parade of ants was crossing the sidewalk. He watched for a moment, then crushed the line with his feet. A few survivors scurried in circles.

Darrol was still fulminating when he passed the top of the Vallejo steps. He decided to stop in the small hillside park. It was a clear day, and he expected the views to be grand and satisfying. This might be an opportunity to do some sketches. His smartass art teacher always wanted students to bring

drawings to class. Mostly to make fun of them. *Sardonic*. That was the word for the bastard. But Darrol would show him.

He hadn't expected to run into someone he knew. But there on a bench, her face to the sun, was Alma Quist.

Darrol was debating whether to quietly step the other way, when Alma opened her eyes. She turned toward him as though she'd sensed his presence.

"Darrol?" she said. She gave him a small, polite smile. At least she didn't have her husband's cold habit of saying 'Mr. Yount.'

"morning, Mrs. Quist." Darrol said. "Store closed? Burned down?"

She took a moment before she laughed. "Hardly. No, Georgia and Hilda are working this morning, and I thought I'd get some fresh air. Playing hooky, and you caught me."

"I've been slaughtering parrots," he said, not sure why he might want to provoke her.

Alma was alarmed. "Slaughtering...?"

"In my head. I don't like the way they're taking over the Hill."

"You're not a bird lover?"

"Those parrots aren't birds, Mrs. Quist. They're invaders. I hate the noise."

"Well, I've been listening to chickadees, sparrows and such. Really sweet, really nice." She hesitated, thought, patted the bench. "Want to sit? And please call me Alma."

He sat beside her and looked down across the sunlit slopes, through the trees and over the whitened city to the bay. It all seemed so still. But when he paid attention, he could hear the constant hum rising, the busyness.

The bench slats were cold. He shifted. Something rough tugged at the back of his trouser legs.

Alma was watching him. "Quite a lot to look at, don't you think?"

"Yep."

She stared out again. "When I find myself thinking about my place in the world—up here, for a moment, I can feel almost like I'm the queen of it all, everything else is so small."

Darrol nodded. His kind of sentiment.

"But paradoxically..." Alma tucked back a wisp of hair. "Looking at this expanse, and knowing how much diverse life is scurrying about down there, then it also makes me feel like I'm only a tiny, tiny part. Queen no more!"

"Speaking of royalty—do you suppose Emperor Norton ever came up here?" Darrol asked.

"Oh, I'd think so," Alma said. "Probably not for panhandling. But maybe surveying his domain. Are you interested in the Emperor?" She seemed surprised.

Darrol flicked a eucalyptus leaf from his sleeve. "He's caught my attention. Quite a character."

"Talk to old Mrs. Durr. She's the expert. Claims she's related to him, which is extremely doubtful. But she's up on his history."

Darrol nodded. He watched a distant airplane moving silently above the bay. The breeze dropped, and the air immediately felt much warmer. The scent of pine drifted lazily around him.

He glanced at Alma. She had closed her eyes again and tilted her head to the sky. Her face seemed tired but kind.

He thought about Her #4, a dumpling like Alma, maybe even smaller. But Her #4 was anything but kind. She was able to rapidly summon the gods of wrath, inflating her angry body like a puff adder. He remembered the hot, lumpy oatmeal raining down on him after he'd said he wanted none, the oily retch of soapsuds after she punished him for a supposed lie. Did he lie back then? Maybe so. He wasn't sure. Sometimes a lie was the only defense.

"Easy to get lost in your thoughts up here, isn't it?" Alma was watching him again.

"I guess. I was back in my childhood."

"Happy times?"

"Anything but."

Alma waited, but Darrol added nothing more.

"I'm sorry," she finally said.

Shrugging, he mustered up a little politeness. "And you? Grow up in Sweden like your husband?"

"No, I was born here. Right in San Francisco in fact. But both my parents were Swedish immigrants. They clung pretty

heavily to the old traditions." She laughed. "That's probably why I have a small purple birthmark in the shape of Sweden on my derriere. Willed on me by my mother."

Darrol gave her a small grin. "If that's how it works, my mother—whoever she was—must have willed my birthmark too."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I got something looks like one of those inkblot tests on my thigh. I reckon she wanted me to spend my life guessing what it meant." He snorted. "Or maybe who I am."

"You sound like you're a little down on yourself."

"Down on...? I don't think so."

"You got anybody cheering you on? Your girlfriend maybe? She seems like a nice person."

"I don't need cheering on."

Darrol stood, stretched, and moved back onto the path. A chastising squirrel scrambled to avoid him.

"Everybody needs at least one cheerleader," Alma said quietly.

"Naw. You do it for yourself. That's the best way. Maybe the only way." Darrol began jumping up and down. "See? I go rah! Rah! Rah!" He flailed his arms. "Gimme a D, gimme an A!"

He stopped and moved hair away from his forehead.

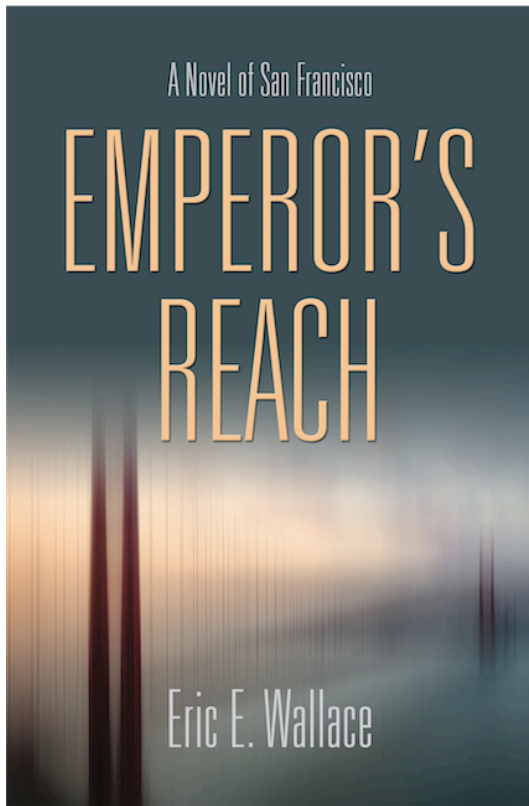
Alma chuckled. "OK, OK. I'm convinced. If you ever want to be a cheerleader for the 'Norton, let us know. I bet we could use you."

"I'll remember."

Darrol said goodbye and returned to the street. The odors of hot tar and juniper welcomed him.

Above him, a hawk was circling. He stared up at it.

Hope you got your sights on something good. Maybe on a goddam parrot.



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