

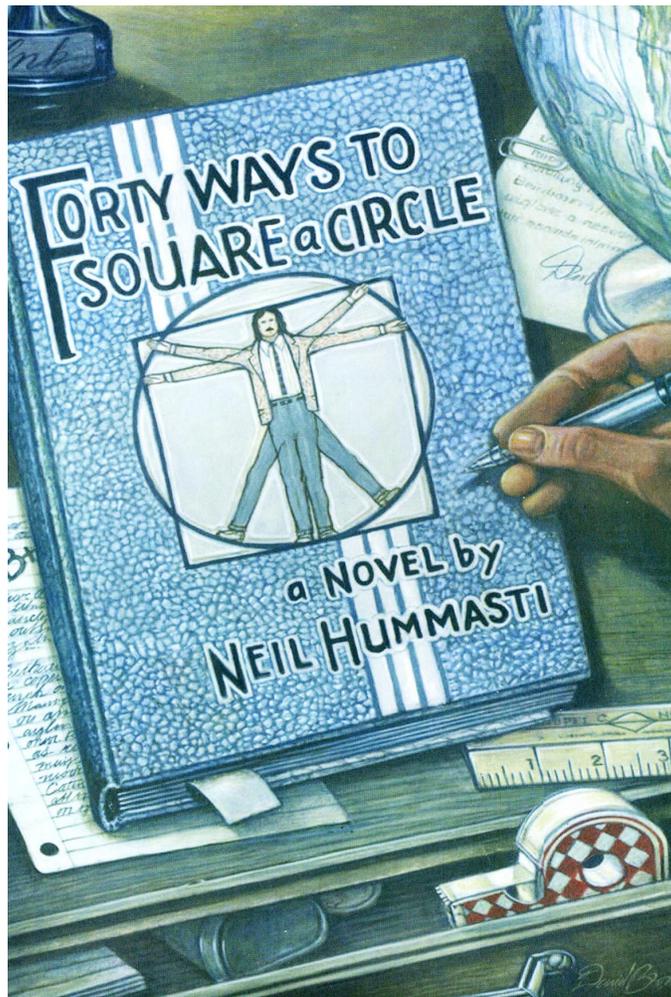
https://www.discoverourcoast.com/coast-weekend/arts/bookmonger-hummasti-s-posthumous-novel-a-love-song-to-humanity/article_85fbf8bc-19f1-11e9-a8b7-1b7e1365eb12.html

Bookmonger: Hummasti's posthumous novel a love song to humanity

'Forty Ways to Square a Circle' is a mighty fine read

Coast Weekend

Jan 24, 2019



The cover art of Neil Hummasti's 'Forty Ways to Square a Circle,' drawn by Dave McMacken.

Svensen Pioneer Press

Every once in a while a novelist captures a place with such immediacy and creates a predicament with such immersive power, that the reader — when the phone rings in her own home, or the cat bumps against her leg wanting supper — will look up and wonder, “Where am I?”

Such is the case with "Forty Ways to Square a Circle," a semi-autobiographical novel about Casey Merriman, a high school language arts teacher who, over the course of spring semester in 1996, watches as his school's administration dismantles the humanities curriculum for a new emphasis on computer literacy.

As if that weren't disheartening enough, Merriman goes home every night to tend to his elderly aunt, whose grip on reality is crumbling away due to dementia.

You might extrapolate some parallels there. Keep reading, and you'll find more to chew on.

This novel has been published posthumously. Author Neil Hummasti was an Astoria resident who died of cancer in 2011. He had a long career as a high school English teacher and coach. On the side, he wrote prodigiously: essays, tracts, short stories and novels.

Upon Hummasti's death, his brother discovered this writing cache, along with dozens of complimentary rejection slips from top New York publishing houses. Deciding it was high time that these works reached the reading public, Arnie Hummasti formed Svensen Pioneer Press and has begun publishing these works to honor and share his brother's legacy.

"Forty Ways to Square a Circle" is set in the fictional town of Coboway (named after a real-life Clatsop chief who befriended Lewis & Clark), on the Oregon side of the Lower Columbia River. Just as those explorers from two centuries earlier had bemoaned the rain, Hummasti also takes repeated note of the consistently dank weather of the place.

It tends to reinforce the protagonist's gloomy outlook on his situation in life. Merriman is increasingly thwarted by the dingbat principal who runs his school, and by his once vivacious aunt's downward spiral.

Oh, sure, there are bright spots in his days. Among his colleagues, he counts spirited language arts teacher Doria Herrera and long-in-the-tooth science teacher Kit Early as friends. Merriman draws strength from his students, too, and they in turn are engaged in the work he sets before them.

His own dreams and potential, however, have been smothered by disappointments and obligations, and midlife torpor has set in.

But then a school shooting shakes things up, and an improbable love triangle manifests, and a drowning occurs, and a life-threatening diagnosis is revealed.

Merriman is nudged out of his rut and prompted to take a rash action that will force him to see things anew.

"Forty Ways to Square a Circle" is an erudite story, layered with observations on the human condition that extend from the ancient Greeks to pop culture of the late 20th century. It's a forceful argument for teaching the humanities, and a poignant love song to humanity — and other living things.

Best of all, it's a mighty fine read.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlink.com.

THIS WEEK'S BOOK

Forty Ways to Square a Circle

By Neil Hummasti

Svensen Pioneer Press

224 pp

\$18.95