

315 pounds of fun

"The Ecstatic" by Victor LaValle; Crown; 272 pages; \$22.95



In a season marked

by some high-profile sophomore slumps in contemporary fiction — Zadie Smith's "Autograph Man," Dave Eggers' "And You Shall Know Us By Our Velocity," and Donna Tartt's "The Little Friend" — a lesser-known second-time author not only beats the slump but has written one of the funniest, darkest novels of the year.

"The Ecstatic" is 30-year-old Victor LaValle's follow-up to "Slapboxing With Jesus," a critically acclaimed short story collection that drew comparisons to Junot Diaz's "Drown."

And while LaValle has a wholly original style, the damaged, colorful protagonist of "The Ecstatic" is a clueless soul reminiscent of "A Confederacy of Dunces'" Ignatius J. Reilly and, more recently, "Motherless Brooklyn"'s Lionel Essrog.

Anthony is a morbidly obese 23-year-old Cornell student who is found, naked and confused, in his off-campus apartment. He is diagnosed as suffering from mild dementia and brought home to Queens by his grandmother, his 13-year-old sister and his equally unstable mother.

Each woman tries to cure Anthony in their own way: His mother puts him on a diet, his sister preaches religion and his grandmother ignores his affliction.

But Anthony ignores them all, preferring to sneak the occasional entire package of candy bars and taking odd jobs as a house cleaner and an asbestos remover.

Not much happens — aside from a hilarious road trip to Virginia, where his sister wants to compete in two beauty contests (one for girls who've successfully defended their virginity and another that rewards girls of any size as long as they have tales of woe).

Then Anthony's mother goes AWOL after hooking up with an Indian man she's met at a local bar. (Eventually the family regroup and returns to New York — if not emotionally intact, at least physically.)

LaValle has written a gracefully funny, character-driven black comedy of errors. In a brilliant touch, LaValle creates scenarios in which Anthony seems to be thinking silently to himself, only to have other characters respond to his commentary.

It's never clear whether Anthony is speaking aloud or whether all the voices live only in his head, but it's just one of the many modest quirks that make "The Ecstatic" utterly unforgettable.

— Michael Giltz