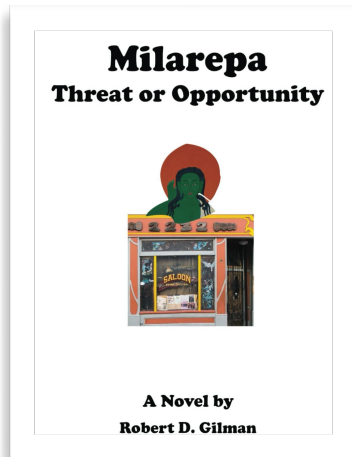




# INDEPENDENT BOOK REVIEW

A CELEBRATION OF SMALL PRESS AND SELF-PUBLISHED BOOKS



## *Milarepa—Threat or Opportunity*

By Robert D. Gilman

Genre: Literary Fiction

Reviewed by Toni Woodruff

### A surrealist dream, a guiding hand into the beautiful unexpected

If you were to tell the story of your life, where would you begin? Robert, the narrator of *Milarepa—Threat or Opportunity* decides to tell from the middle. After all, life is *always* in the middle.

Thus begins the tale of the Californian North Beach bars, Robert's on and off lover Toni, and the spiritual deity that turned her into a mystical guide. After a long period of social justice work and fighting against the Vietnam draft, Robert, or Rainier Bob as he's known, ends up in North Beach like debris from a tornado.

The people there are eccentric with nicknames to match: Lucky Bob, Small, Tall, Duke, and so on. He meets Toni, an artist with substance abuse disorder and extremely strong impulses. Their time together is volatile, as Toni's flighty nature makes it difficult for anything serious to happen between them.

Their relationship seemingly ends with Toni's tragic death, with Bob even holding her in her final moments, but soon after, Milarepa, a Buddhist disciple, appears and transforms Toni into a Dakini, a female Buddhist spirit.

To try and fulfill her purpose, she begins to work as a bartender during the Limbo Shift, described as "*an off and on after hours shift at the Saloon.*" The Limbo Shift grows in popularity and starts to disturb the once rock solid community of North Beach.

*Milarepa—Threat or Opportunity* is so wonderfully erratic. All the characters and their small idiosyncrasies are specific and vivid. At one point, Robert recalls Dolly,

another North Beach community member, throwing out his daughter's pet turtle after she left it in the fridge to hibernate for a year. On the surface, it doesn't seem like these small tales are anything substantial, but it's a big part of the book's charm. Rather than try to make them as realistic as possible, it's like the goal is the opposite—and still remaining reflective of the human experience. The more outlandish the person, the more they seem at home at North Beach. It's a system that really works well for this novel.

The nicknames are especially interesting. We are often introduced to the character first and then eventually given the story of how they got their nickname. It can be a little confusing at first, but eventually, it's easy to discern who each person is and why they're in North Beach. Many of them are, at least societally, considered "**freeloaders.**" In *Milarepa—Threat or Opportunity*, they are humanized and cared for, at least in Robert's memories. They find a place to belong in North Beach and thus, become the soul of the novel.

There are some repetitive paragraphs and sentences without clear direction that can make the reading a bit difficult to parse through, but it's all worth it in the end.

This book is so different than anything I've read before. *Milarepa—Threat or Opportunity* is a remarkably fresh surrealist adventure you'll be glad you went on.