FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Autobiography & Memoir

A Memory of Trains: The Boll Weevil and Others
Louis D. Rubin Jr.
University of South Carolina Press
978-1-57003-382-7
(September 30, 2000)

Rubin is a beloved figure in the publishing world. As founder of Algonquin Books, he provided a launching pad for Southern writers such as Jill McCorkle, Clyde Edgerton, and Lee Smith at a time when fledgling authors from the hinterlands had little chance of breaking into the New York literary establishment. A prolific writer himself, Rubin has penned, edited, or otherwise compiled a vast body of fiction and nonfiction dealing with topics as varied as shipping and baseball. Now comes his fiftieth book, a short memoir of his lifelong love affair with trains.

From his childhood in Charleston, South Carolina, Rubin was fascinated with the mechanical leviathans—with the sense of adventure and mystery they evoked, with their power, energy, and, yes, beauty. “One saw the train, one heard it and smelled it, and one felt it—not only in the sense of the earth trembling and the wind rushing by as it passed, but as an experience involving the assertion of singularity, the display of strength and a capacity for distances: the achievement of spectacle.” While a young journalist in the forties and fifties, he studied trains as a hobby, rode them at every opportunity, and took untold numbers of photographs. More than a hundred are reproduced in this book, providing a visual stroll down Memory Lane for readers who recall when riding the rails was the primary means of traveling between states or cities.

This is simultaneously a book about trains and the writer’s young adulthood. Hence, the railroad becomes something of a metaphor for Rubin’s personal journey in search of love and a fulfilling career. Toward the end, he gives a richly detailed account of a six-hour trip from aptly named Hamlet, N.C., to Charleston—a disappointing ride, for his heart had been set on finally taking a gas-electric coach nicknamed “Boll Weevil,” only to discover it had been mothballed. It serves as a symbol of the decline of the passenger train era, and perhaps of the author’s transition from youthfulness to maturity as he realizes that very little in life lasts forever.

As Rubin acknowledges, the book may contain a bit too much technical detail and jargon

for casual readers and too little for train buffs. Together with the wealth of photographs, however, the text offers a pleasing pick-me-up for those suffering from what Arlo Guthrie labeled “the disappearing railroad blues.”

John Flesher