Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

A School for Others
George LeBard
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Three Stars (out of Five)

George LeBard leaves a drug- and alcohol-fogged life of sexual indulgence, joins the Peace Corps, and serves in the country of Belize. The irony of LeBard's story juxtaposes his flight from substance abuse with Belize's downward spiral into the drug trade, yet when LeBard arrived, the Central American backcountry offered him the ideal family-centric seclusion. In the region he lived, families passed lush sugarcane fields from generation to generation. Sadly, when sugarcane prices began to plummet, most farmers were caught without a back-up plan, or the ability to diversify their crops, so marijuana farming quickly took up the slack, with instant and lucrative income. But this new crop also attracted drug dealers, gangs, and violence. Five years later, when LeBard left Belize, gunfire was a daily occurrence.

Before leaving, LeBard helped introduce gardens into local schools, and established the Belize High School of Agriculture, for which this book is named. The author's vision offered alternative agricultural training to students who had failed to qualify for higher education. The idea was to provide another path to self-sufficiency. The school's success, according to LeBard, continues to this day. Unfortunately, LeBard provides few details about the school's students, its day-to-day activities, or curriculum. On the other hand, certain readers will be interested to read his descriptions of the poisonous snakes that were driven from the property.

LeBard describes himself in 1981 as, "thirty-one years old, six feet tall, and a skinny 155 pounds on a good day, with reddish-blond hair and fair skin that burns at the thought of going into the sun." Unlike his fellow volunteers, he had no college degrees, but he did possess serious self-esteem issues. As he struggles with Belize's primitive rural culture and dangerous landscape, LeBard also offers evidence of his personal growth. He writes of snakes, poisonous trees, and fire ants. He learns to handle a machete, and gradually, take control of his life, "At first, the hardest part of my job is the lack of structure. My work day doesn't happen unless I

make it happen. There's no blueprint or plan…. Back home when I went to work, I knew what I had to do; there was structure."

The author was positioned perfectly to document a country in flux, but chooses instead to write about his attraction to the beautiful women, drinking and bonding with Belize men, as well as his own transition from a 155-pound weakling into a muscular man who welcomes a good fight. This memoir offers only a superficial glimpse of the birth of the Belize High School of Agriculture, Belize's assimilation into the global market, the drug wars, and how all these issues intersect.

The book includes a hand-drawn map of Belize, brief epilogue, and some photos. LeBard also provides an update on a few of the people he was connected with back in the 1980s. Alas, readers may find this memoir only whets their appetite for more information about the little country of Belize and its amazing citizens.

Dawn Goldsmith