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A Taste of the Sweet Apple: A Memoir

Jo Anna Holt Watson
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One of the highest compliments given to good memoirs is that they read like novels, with premise and plot, rather than like dry book reports listing facts and dates. In this inaugural title in the Woodford Reserve Series in Kentucky Literature, the first-time author, who is a self-proclaimed “Yellow Dog Democrat,” a recycling advocate, and the creator of a political TV show called *Plumbline*, is gifted with a storytellers grace. Her vignettes—sometimes humorous, sometimes poignant—evoke a certain nostalgia as she recounts her childhood as a little tomboy nicknamed Pig growing up on a Kentucky tobacco farm in the 1940s.

Pigs is a privileged, idyllic youth. Her father, Doc, is the small towns doctor, a handsome, imposing man with a quick temper and vitriolic loathing for FDR. Her mother, Sallie Gay, is a beautiful society matron whom Pig admires on the one hand for her willingness to get her hands dirty in the garden and for her liberal social politics (the exact opposite of Docs). On the other hand, Pig doesn’t understand her mothers seeming enslavement to beautifying herself (what tomboy does?).

The books chapters are episodic, each a self-contained yarn. The issue of race relations is touched upon only lightly; one gets the sense that this is because the characters are complacent with their life’s stations, even if that station is brutal field-hand work. Readers are introduced to characters who fall a tad close—verity notwithstanding—to being Southern stereotypes, their names ripe with Bluegrass folksiness, like: Eva Belle Twyman, the cook; Daddy Rat Parrish, a field hand; Ocean Frog, an African-American shopkeeper; Scooter the town sheriff: and Sudie Louisa, Pigs aunt. Overall, however, their voices ring true.

It is the plainly named Joe Collins who is at the heart of Pigs coming of age. Joe runs the tobacco farm, and Pig worships him: “Joe was a man of the earth and he never met a stranger.” It is Joe who instills in the little girl a love for farming. He teaches her to drive a tractor and literally taste the earth. He introduces her to spicy sweet Apple Chewing Tobacco, which isn’t as disconcerting as anti-tobacco campaigners of today would make it seem: “In those days, burley tobacco was king and that crop set our life in the Bluegrass apart from the rest of the world.”

In the books most riveting chapter, “Haint Blue,” Pigs father passes out at a strangers home one night. Focusing on the thought of Joe for reassurance, the ten-year-old must drive Docs limp bulk through two counties and over a cursed bridge to get to home. In this memoir, which deserves the compliment that it reads like a novel, Joe Collins is the girls guardian angel and the authors muse.

OLIVIA BOLER (August 18, 2009)

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