ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

GENERAL

Aaron's Ride
Jeff Shapiro
Banta
978-0-9754908-3-9
One Star (out of Five)

A small-town boy Aaron Zalkand fails to get good enough grades and SAT scores to get into Duke University shattering his parents' carefully orchestrated dreams for his future and knocking him irrevocably off the path they'd hoped his life would take. Emotionally adrift he decides to sell his things buy a motorcycle and head cross-country seeking his destiny. A decent enough idea for a "coming of age" novel though it's certainly been done hundreds of times before. Since this story is semi-biographical however one might have high expectations for the book. Sadly the plot is as pedestrian as one might fear and the author's writing is downright dreadful.

Successful stories require that readers bond deeply with the characters. This flat dispassionate tale falls well short of that mark. There are lots of events and dialogue but virtually no emotional component to the writing. For example while the author takes a full paragraph to describe the process of starting a Harley Davidson motorcycle he describes Aaron's feelings with monosyllabic words trite clichés and lackluster expressions such as "making him feel stinky and smelly inside."

Worse yet many of the events portrayed in the book are downright unbelievable such as when eighteen-year-old Aaron hangs himself in the garage as a practical joke taking the tension off his neck with a safety harness. Almost all of the players in the drama are overused stereotypes particularly the landlady and various guttersnipes who live near his apartment in Dallas.

Another huge problem with the story is Aaron's religion. Great Jewish writers such as Chaim Potok have used their character's faith or lack thereof as pivotal themes upon which their stories evolve. Not so here. Judaism only serves only to make Aaron's doctor father and social-climber mother even more stereotypical and tawdry than they would otherwise be. The protagonist's disdain for his religion is but one more aspect of his personality that readers of all faiths will find distasteful.

One of the flashbacks Aaron has while driving his motorcycle is reliving his Bar Mitzvah the momentous Jewish ceremony where boys become men in the eyes of their church. During this rite Aaron must read from the Torah his religion's most sacred scroll. A day earlier he was stung on the lips by a bee so his friend Megan helps him cover the wound with make-up to protect his vanity. As he reads flecks of lipstick fall onto the scroll but no body seems to notice or care when he smears makeup on the sacred parchment. In real life no one reads the Torah alone. At least two people would have been standing there with him. Smeared lipstick would have been considered a grave desecration with severe consequences. For example if someone accidentally drops the Torah the whole congregation must fast for forty days.

There are about 45000 coming of age stories out there for readers to choose from. Sadly just about any of them would be better than this one.