Clarion Review

Literary

Altamont Augie
Richard Barager
Interloper Press
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Five Stars (out of Five)

"What kind of man goes to one of the biggest rock concerts of the sixties, manages to drown in a nearby irrigation canal an hour into the show, and is never identified?" That's what Caleb Levy attempts to discover in 1999, when his job putting together a trailer for the 30th anniversary rerelease of the rock documentary *Gimme Shelter* leads him to this unsolved mystery and possible screenplay idea.

His search for the man's identity is bookended by the story of the tumultuous, roller-coaster romance of two young Minnesota co-eds, David Noble and Jackie Lundquist, from the mid-to-late 1960s, a highly volatile time on college campuses.

This engrossing novel follows the couple as they wind up on different sides of the Vietnam War issue: Jackie, a child of privilege, finds excitement in the campus anti-war protest movement and finds herself attracted to its leader; David, "a serial foster child" searching for non-anonymity, a place to belong, and wanting to be a patriot and honor his country, joins the Marines.

The book's title comes from what Levy tentatively plans to call his yet unwritten screenplay, a combination of the infamous rock concert location (Altamont Speedway) and "a wry tribute" to the title character in Saul Bellow's classic, *The Adventures of Augie March*.

The author is a physician who also champions the power of literature; he espouses this belief on his blog, The Literary Doctor. It took him three years to write the book; his extensive research is evident in the background history fleshing out the characters' stories. An accompanying website even includes a playlist of sixteen songs of the sixties era.

The action alternates from midwestern locales (Minneapolis, Chicago, Madison) to one of the most intense battles in Vietnam (Khe Sanh) to that hotbed of anti-war activity, UC Berkeley. Barager vividly—even if at times using a schoolteacher tone—captures the politics of

the time.

Readers travel with “hippie goddess” Jackie as she rides to Chicago with militant Kyle to take part in the chaos that was part of the 1968 Democratic Convention. They endure boot camp and the horrors of war with David and his fellow marines, Beau and Colucci. They wait to see how the love triangle between David and Jackie and Kyle ultimately plays out.

This book is an excellent primer for anyone not quite familiar with all the political players and ideas of the time. It is historical fiction at its very best. The main characters are true-to-life and make the readers care. Because it takes place mainly during the late 1960s, the “sex, drugs, and rock and roll” mantra is played out accordingly.

Barager’s writing is always on target. For example, here’s one of David’s first visions of Jackie: “Fair of complexion and lightly freckled, she possessed a devastating blend of Midwestern wholesomeness and centerfold wantonness.”

In the end, Caleb Levy learns a whole lot more than just the name of the man who died at Altamont.

Robin Farrell Edmunds