

Ballina Boy

Roger KA Allen

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Roger KA Allen has written a beautiful and fascinating memoir about his family and childhood growing up in Australia in the 1950s. The son of a “unique” country doctor and a nurse, Allen touchingly chronicles his life in Australia from the time that his mother was pregnant with him to his ninth birthday. He describes how his father’s “restlessness drove us into the wilderness like the Israelites in search of that promise of a land of milk and honey,” which his family found in Ballina, New South Wales, where his father bought a local doctor’s practice.

The author’s observations and accounts are very telling of the place and time that he grew up, from the descriptions surrounding his father’s medical practice to the medical profession in general, and the practice of frontal lobotomy or the “horrors of shock therapy,” to the introduction of television which had most Australians more educated about American culture and politics than their own. Allen also brings to light the similarities between the way the Australians and Americans treated the real “first settlers” to both those countries, recounting the history of racism and atrocities against the Aboriginal people, and the imaginary games of “Explorers versus Aboriginals” and “Cowboys and Indians.” Throughout the book, Allen places the events of his childhood Australia in context with world events, effectively comparing and contrasting just how similar and different his own experiences and “struggles” were compared to those of people in other countries.

Allen’s characters are human and real, filled with strengths and flaws, with all their prejudices, love, and hate, from his father who is so devoted to his profession to his mother’s relentless loyalty to her family, to the residents of the town and the people he meets on his travels. Allen’s story captures the wide range of boyhood emotions. We see joys of his childhood expressed in humorous accounts, like his father battling with crabs that are doing their best to avoid the “final trip on the tumbrels to the final hell of the execution pot.” He evokes a young boy’s wonder in the description of the aftermath of a flood which lends itself to a great exploration of the insects, shrimp, and frogs that have surfaced. The author evinces the humor of the “sex education” offered by the “literary delights” at the local barber and the heartbreak of childhood lessons when he describes a touring marionette company’s performance about a little Aboriginal boy who befriends a baby wombat. “But in the end the boy had to leave them all to return to the world of humans as if this mortal life always has to have a sad ending.”

Ballina Boy is a childhood account brought to life in a rich tapestry of anecdotes, stories, culture, and history lessons—a highly recommended read.

MAYA FLEISCHMANN (March 25, 2011)

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