

ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Cloudbreak, California: A Memoir

Kelly Daniels

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“The whole father-son thing” drifts into focus in memoir of killer’s son.

Cloudbreak, California is Kelly Daniels’ memoir of drifting through a series of adventures in Latin America, while attempting to reconcile the fantasy and the reality of his elusive father.

His early childhood home in California was a step van, the family moving from beach to beach, his father more interested in the perfect wave than his son. Tripping on mescaline when his second son is born—in the van—ultimately Daniels’ father drifts in and out, showing up one day to pull Daniels from his ninth-grade classroom and tell him that he has killed someone. Then he jumps bail and disappears.

Told in the structure of fiction, Daniels sprinkles interior monologues among tales of adventure in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Mexico. Ironically, the young Daniels becomes even more of a vagabond than his father. “Something about moving, particularly away from responsibilities, always lightened my spirit,” he writes.

The ability to surf becomes a metaphor for Daniels’ ability to relate to his father. And he can’t do either. But, as children will, he blames himself for having been afraid the first time his father took him out. “If only I’d handled myself more courageously, Dad would then have been more interested in teaching me to surf ...”

When his vague dream about someday meeting his father on a tropical island is shattered by the news that his father has been captured and put in jail, Daniels realizes that he’s been “waiting around, for nothing.” All the things he’s done to impress his father—traveling, playing in a band, and generally being a nonconformist—are of little interest to his father, who asks him if he ever got around to learning how to surf.

“Dad was a surfer. He grew up at the beach. I grew up in the desert and played baseball. The facts were the facts ... Now it was over, the whole surfing thing, the whole father-son thing.”

The writing is compelling, peopled with a pantheon of fellow drifters and down-at-their-heels natives. While the final chapter is a bit anticlimactic, readers do come to care about the young Daniels and his struggle to find his niche in the world.

Kelly Daniels is a professor of creative writing at Augustana College. He has published fiction and nonfiction in Cimarron Review, Puerto del Sol, Sonora Review and South Dakota Review, among others. Daniels lives in Illinois, with his wife and son.

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