

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Confessions of a Seeking Soul

Charles E. Willard

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Four Stars (out of Five)

While it is by no means a breeze to be a gay American in the twenty-first century, the United States has come a long way from the secrecy, universal shame, and code words described in Charles E. Willard's autobiography, *Confessions of a Seeking Soul*. This bracingly honest must-read chronicles the author's journey from the 1940s to 2008, as he searches for his father, the love of good men, and self-acceptance of his sexual orientation. Along the way, he suffers abuse by family members, rejection by lovers who he looks to as father figures, mental illness, and imprisonment for arson. Despite these trials, he has moments of self-discovery, becomes a poet, and enjoys happy romances with both men and women. And, ultimately, the author develops a rapport with his father, whom he learns is also gay.

The number of characters in the story makes it difficult to remember who's who, but Willard's gift with words allows him to deftly describe major players in a way that clearly shows their influence in his life, detailing both their personalities and looks so that they become full-fledged people to readers. Willard describes the harrowing love-hate dynamic that many victims of child abuse feel toward their torturers. He chillingly depicts the growth of his violent side, beginning in childhood, and he poignantly expresses how he felt possessed by mental illness both as a child and a teen. His malicious behavior as a child foreshadows Willard's mental collapse as an adult. The author says he started searching for his dad because his parents divorced at age one and his dad abandoned the family. Further, he believes that an encounter at age three, when a man bought him ice cream, led him to seek out and forge connections with older men in an effort to find a paternal figure. Although this may be true, the constant comparison of his male partners to either the man who bought him ice cream, or to his father, becomes tedious rather quickly.

Willard is at his best when he describes himself grappling with his sexual orientation. The detailed depictions of shame, the ecstasy of sexual experience, the anxiety of looking for men on the sly, and the worry of being found out make for vivid reading. He takes the audience

into the underground world of gay men in search of companionship, and as he depicts his stint in the armed forces, Willard reminds readers of the agony gays suffered in the military before the recent policy change.

What makes *Confessions of a Seeking Soul* such a contradiction is that the author fails to prove his own theme: each individual's lack of specialness and the fact that everyone is a "lonely, lonely bastard." In the end, the author comes across as a unique, resilient person who has support from an ever-shifting network of family, friends, and lovers. The book is recommended for gay adolescents and adults, as well as their heterosexual allies. Although it contains profanity and explicit sex scenes, these details are necessary to capture the author's experience.

Jill Allen