

Della Raye: A Girl Who Grew Up in Hell and Emerged Whole

Gary Penley

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“Della Raye’s only possession was the ragged, filthy dress she wore—made from a discarded feed sack. Hunger had stalked every day of her short life. She had never tasted ice cream, never petted a puppy, never played with a doll.” Life was already tough for four-year-old Della Raye Rogers in Alabama in 1929. It was about to get worse. Along with her mother, aunt, and a brother, she was committed to a mental institution by an uncle who didn’t have the means to care for the family.

The author writes that institutions during this pre-Depression era served as sort of a “dumping grounds” for society’s undesirables. Rogers’s mother—with low intellect and three illegitimate children—fell into this subjective category. Della Raye—a bright child of normal intelligence—did not.

This is the author’s second book; his first was a memoir of his boyhood on the eastern Colorado plains during the 1940s and ’50s. Penley, a petroleum geologist, began writing professionally only recently.

He traces Rogers’ life as she grew to adulthood in the Partlow State School for Mental Deficients during the next twenty years. It was a life of hard work, cruel guardians, and unfathomable conditions. (The “Untidy Ward” referred to the building where the seriously mentally ill were segregated; regular patients were sent there when they misbehaved. Because of her sassiness, Della Raye made this trip more than once.)

Rogers’s streak of stubbornness in this man-made hell contributed to her survival, as did kindnesses few and far between, friendships forged, and spiritual guidance. She was finally released in 1949, a step ahead of lawsuits filed on her behalf by others. Released to the custody of her Uncle Richard, the same man who’d originally committed her family, Penley notes that while poverty was still prevalent in the South at this time, “the postwar boom had enabled some of the more ambitious to begin upgrading their lives. Not Richard. He just had more kids.”

The last section of the book details Della Raye’s search for a fulfilling life outside Partlow. Penley’s matter-of-fact narrative is interspersed with Della Raye’s own words.

This is a true story about an extraordinary woman and her strength through extraordinary trials. At age seventy-three, Della Raye Rogers finally received her first doll—from her grandchildren.

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