



Dibs and Dabs of My Life

Gertrude Coulter

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Nonagenarian Gertrude Coulter's memoir, *Dibs and Dabs of My Life*, is an entertaining and nostalgic collection of pieces about the author's Tennessee life, a look back to a time of iceboxes, scrub boards, and organ grinders.

Until she was three, Coulter's family lived with her grandparents in Memphis. Those happy times included sitting on a porch swing and watching her grandmother prepare a fried chicken dinner by catching a chicken to "twist it 'round and 'round" and wring its neck, and watching her mother fix a plate of food for beggars at the height of the Great Depression.

Some of the book's more detailed recollections include the ritual of daily ice deliveries and the tedium of wash day—first using a ribbed washboard, then "graduating" to an electric wringer washer.

In a friendly yet brutally honest voice, Coulter tells of marrying right out of high school and having four children before divorcing her abusive husband. Her stories are concise, ably relaying the difficulties of being a single parent and earning a teaching degree as well as the joys of retirement.

Well-chosen period photographs of Coulter's family members add to the nostalgic feel of the stories. Although family and friends are spoken of with affection, the text reveals scant information regarding the characters themselves, which comes to detract from the depth of the stories.

The most powerful writing occurs when the author conveys her feelings about making her way through various life changes. This is accomplished both with reflective dialogue and through the stories themselves.

Some of the text is puzzling, with events shared out of sequence, or an acquaintance appearing whose presence isn't really explored until a few stories later. Transitions between anecdotes are not always clear, leading to some awkwardness.

Still, the text is largely linear and easy to follow; events are written with appropriate detail, and scenes are generally well conveyed. The majority of the book moves along at a comfortable pace, with occasional moments of excessive elaboration that slow reading progress, such as around moves into new houses or apartments.

Through Coulter's eyes, the book provides a brief, satisfying look into times past. *Dibs and Dabs of My Life* is an enjoyable collection of personal stories that are told with humor and candor, capturing one woman's life with appealing nostalgia for bygone days.

LORRAINE RAVIS (October 6, 2017)

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