

Encounters: A Memoir

Sam Oglesby

Memoir (March 2010)

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Encounters takes readers from the segregated, World War II-era American South, around the world, and back again. Sam Oglesby's memoir is a delightful read, laden with sketches from the world's far corners that are both candid and appreciative.

The author spent most of his childhood on his grandmother's farm near Girdletree, Maryland. "Calling Girdletree a village was probably bestowing more dignity on this benighted one-horse town than it deserved," he writes. Oglesby offers an intriguing portrait of his paternal grandmother, who was born on an isolated island in Chesapeake Bay. She married a widowed physician and then was left a widow herself to raise a son alone. Her story would likely make an interesting book in itself.

From Girdletree, Oglesby moved to Japan where his father worked. Then it was off to college in the US. He eventually graduates from the University of Virginia, despite his less than stellar academic performance. Though Encounters is primarily about the author's world travel, this college chapter reveals a secondary story thread when he begins dating a girl from a wealthy family:

I realized that tying the knot with her would mean that I would never have to lift a finger again or worry about finding a job. Was this what I wanted?...My attraction to men had become obvious to me. Did I want to lead a double life and probably end up a two-timing alcoholic?

Oglesby's coming to grips with his sexuality is a casual element in his story, noted mostly when it overtly influences his chosen career, such as when his application to become a Foreign Service Officer is rejected after a background check.

To dwell on these incidents, however, is to miss the panoramic scope of Encounters. The book offers a grand tour of exotic places by a man who was born to see the world. After college, Oglesby is drafted into the Army, serves in Libya, travels Europe, and leaves the military to teach in a private school in Switzerland. Then come places like Bologna and Paris before his career with the UN takes him to Thailand, Burma, and Indonesia, where, "There were fragrant clove trees and towering palms; the leaves of banana plants would rustle in the breeze with the sound of a hula dancer's grass skirt."

But his wanderlust is still not satisfied. His other travels spark deft descriptions. In Ceylon (Sri Lanka), he meets "Bevis Bawa, who had a farm near Brief." Oglesby explains that Bevis "had everything money could buy except one thing: Vivien Leigh." Bawa's passion inspires jealousy in the heart of Leigh's absent husband, the famed actor Laurence Olivier. Oglesby notes, "Apparently Larry Olivier was never told Bevis was as gay as a box of birds."

Fifteen chapters will enthrall any armchair traveler, although two of the last are about his post-retirement New York life. Oglesby is also the author of Postcards from the Past: Portraits of People and Places. Readers who enjoy Encounters will want to look for that volume as well.

GARY PRESLEY (July 1, 2010)

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