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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★

Family: A Life Poem

John Wysner
Wysner John
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An athlete a businessman a man diagnosed with bipolar disorder and the sole survivor of five children John Wysner's life story has the potential to make for compelling poetry. Unfortunately the poet never makes art out of these events. Rather these poems repeat the same details of his life without the benefit of image figurative language epiphany or craft. The book would have been better suited as straight memoir a genre that supports Wysner's instinct to explain.

In many poems he explores his relationship with his parents who provide the engine for not only his life but this volume. His mother is figured as a great supporter; his father as a distant disapproving judge. The couple lost four infant children and handled their grief and their surviving son in vastly different ways. Wysner's mother constructed a plan for his success; his father largely ignored or criticized him. Combine that with professional sports and a bi-polar disorder and interesting poems should arise. Unfortunately by the end of the volume readers know little about the disorder little about the professional sports life and little about the emotional landscape of the poet.

Wysner wrote four business books prior to his foray into poetry one of which was very well received. However poetry is a different model and requires attention to form line breaks rhythm and style; Wysner writes without attention to the rigors and pleasures of the discipline. Each poem begins with a short explanatory paragraph which breaks the cardinal rule of "show; don't tell." Then most of these poems read like prose chopped into lines. For example in the poem "Changes" he writes:

Looking back I can write about this and

sort of understand it (sort of).

But alas when failures around me

ignite my emotional physical fears

and when control is lost…

I am hopeless to regain any level of excellence

until whatever drives me

within my environment—fails changes.

The author identifies a moment of change which is where poems often start but he fails to explore it. Perhaps a specific situation might have led the writer to particular significant details. Perhaps the loss of control might be compared to an element in nature or the culture. In many ways the poem represents the book's lost opportunities. Rather than engaging the actual life of the poet and his particular understanding/vision the writing glosses and generalizes what might potentially have been engaging language and image.

Ultimately the book reads like personal therapy. It lacks the detail and emotional charge to inspire others who have suffered similarly. Wysner acknowledges that he writes largely for pleasure which is the best reason for writing but further reading into the techniques of the genre might deeply enhance both the pleasure of the writer and the

reader.
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