Clarion Review

Literary Collections

From a Window or Two: Memoirs of a Distant Mind
Alan Burton
Burton Alan
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Four Stars (out of Five)

When a book cover pictures the author wearing an oversized paper-m&226;ché fish head readers can be assured that its contents will be amusing. *From a Window or Two* delivers a healthy portion of witty lively and self-deprecating writing but there are also some morose reflections and even despair-ridden poetry in this volume which shows the diversity of the writer.

The first part of the book "Fish Out of Water" contains the author's vignettes about parenting the differences between men and women water skiing football the New Math and other gently humorous topics. Burton's writing is full of staccato lines that usually end with a joke and show his bewilderment at many Americanisms even though the former Brit has lived in the U.S. for more than thirty years. These essays read easily as if the author were chatting with the reader at a backyard barbeque or driving around to yard sales and commiserating about warning signs ("Those who want to turn a profit on old TV Guides wear money belts").

"Confessions of an After-School Teacher" follows next with the same breezy humorous tone and consists of humorous short pieces about the impossible task that Burton and his two colleagues face each day with their overexcited brood. One week they are told to organize a talent show for parental viewing; the next they must produce a puppet show. The author's affection for his charges shines through his veneer of exasperation and the sketches are all very funny particularly his exaggerated description of kids' winter gear and luggage. Parents will no doubt enjoy his summation of herding forty seven-year-olds on a field trip to the movies: "A vomit a movie and a mint."

From this point Burton leads on with an increasingly darker series of writings. First up is a poetry/essay collection "The Misfits" about time spent in an alcoholic shelter. The tone gets bleaker with "Tales from Behind the Wall" about two weeks of court-mandated residence at a psychiatric hospital although Burton still manages wry commentary about mean matrons and the

dangers of wearing hats. Finally the book concludes with “The Withering” and its compilation of poems about pain suicide disappointment alcoholic mothers and an alarming fantasy about smothering a whiny elderly woman at a diner in her plateful of eggs.

Burton is a compelling writer throughout these pieces. Despite the overuse of a few pet phrases (“you see” and “girding my loins” for example) and a few too many essays about his neatnik girlfriend he comes across as an interesting and engaging presence. His honesty in portraying all the facets of his life is admirable and interesting if sometimes harrowing in the later sections and prevents this otherwise diverse compilation of writing styles from rambling. As an autobiography this disparate collection shows both his amusing adventures and his troubles and therefore succeeds as a whole.

Rachel Jagareski