

From The Street Corner to The Corner Office

Michael J. Thomas

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*I've lived a life that's full;
I traveled each and ev'ry highway;
And more, much more than this,
I did it my way*

Frank Sinatra's famous lyrics could have been the theme for Michael J. Thomas, who writes of moving from the streets of Harlem to the upper ranks of management of Allstate Insurance in *From The Street Corner to The Corner Office*. There is little bravado or posturing in this tale, but abundant humor and always honesty and candor.

Thomas was blessed in that he was raised by loving parents, who believed in hard work and virtue. They sent Thomas to parochial schools and kept him in line in New York City in the 1960s. Thomas earned a degree from Morehouse College and later landed an entry level job with Allstate Insurance. From these beginnings (which are glossed over in the book with too little detail), Thomas spends the next twenty-seven years learning the insurance business and successfully climbing the corporate ladder.

As background for his saga, Thomas paints his view of corporate America, its structure, how it operates, and what it means in American culture. "Nowhere is the separation of church and state more pronounced than in Corporate America. The only Almighty to be worshipped in Corporate America is, without question, the almighty dollar." He paints a picture of bosses in this way: "It occurs to me that boss is a four-letter word, which when spelled backward is double SOB. That in no way gives you the right to curse their utter existence." Thomas portrays a parallel universe. He explains, sometimes in graphic detail, not only how the insurance business works, but how this cocky kid from Harlem quickly grew up and embraced the corporate culture.

Along the way, Thomas gives thumbnail sketches of the players he encounters. Describing one gentleman, Thomas refers to him as, "someone I took to be a preternatural force of sinister evil, who sprang from the loins of Satan." As for another executive, "I came to the realization that he was one of the smartest people on earth."

Interwoven into this concise guide to corporate America is a great collection of clichés and borrowed lines from popular tunes, leaving the impression that the author does not take himself or life too solemnly. It would have been enlightening if Thomas had better explained his early life in Harlem, so that readers might discover where he acquired the skills to survive in the corporate world. Assuredly, however, he made this journey his way.

JOHN MICHAEL SENGER (November 9, 2010)

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