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Harnessing a Heritage

D. E. FitzGerald
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D. E. FitzGerald, a retired Navy dentist, wrote *Harnessing a Heritage* to document the stories behind the multitude of mementos he acquired during his life. He organized the wide variety of objects from Buddha statues to fossils into themed collections around his house and twelve of them are showcased in FitzGerald's memoir. Each chapter opens with a photograph of one of the collections and closes with suggestions on how to use his ideas to inspire and educate others, especially children.

The first chapter begins with a montage of several family photographs arranged on an attractive trunk whose history the author also shares. FitzGerald does an excellent job of using the photos to explain his family dynamics, but unfortunately, it's hard to imagine anyone outside his family being interested. This problem permeates *Harnessing a Heritage*, and most readers will struggle to remain engaged. To the authors credit, he writes well and endeavors to tell a bit of general background and history about many of the objects and themes. This information is sometimes entertaining and a welcome contrast to the tedious anecdotes, but does come off as a bit contrived.

Chapter two is about the author's musical tastes and begins with a photo of two record album covers surrounded by compact discs. Again, the stories are mostly personal to those within FitzGerald's circle. Other collections are souvenirs from the Philippines and American Southwest, trophies and plaques, favorite books, shells, and two chapters on his art collection. Several stories are about FitzGerald's brushes with fame, such as the summer when Grant Wood, who painted *American Gothic*, stayed in a cottage adjacent to the one where FitzGerald summered. Others highlight his wife's tastes and philanthropic pursuits and the adventures of his two sons. Much ink is used explaining how the author happened to acquire particular objects, and his enthusiasm for serendipity and coincidence is a tad infectious.

FitzGerald is a gifted writer and *Harnessing a Heritage* does have a nice flow. It holds several gems of insight, history, and experiences that serve to somewhat redeem the occasional page of listless prose. For example, the first chapter on his art showcases rubbings, which is a fascinating subject. Further, the chapter ends with a few excellent ways to inspire the creative spirit in children. He writes, "Commission your child to do a specific project for you. Pay him or her a commission or reward them in some tangible fashion. The project could be a drawing, a model, or even a construction. Agree on a way to display it." His idea is simple, yet profound.

Parents or grandparents wanting to find ways to display the mementos of their lives for personal gratification and to instill a sense of history and pride in their offspring, might find it worthwhile to dig into *Harnessing a Heritage* to find FitzGerald's helpful suggestions. The book does serve as a well done example for those considering writing their memoirs for the enjoyment of family and friends.

PATTY SUTHERLAND (April 1, 2011)

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