

Hillbilly Queer

J.R. Jamison

The Facing Project Press (May 11, 2021)

Softcover \$19.95 (242pp)

978-1-73455-816-6

“Denying parts of who we are can create acceptance, and it can also tear us apart”: this conundrum is central to J.R. Jamison’s memoir *Hillbilly Queer*, about how accompanying his father to his fifty-fifth high school reunion became a personal window into the national political divide. It reconstructs Jamison’s understanding of where he’s from, as well as of his own history.

Jamison’s dad is described as a “man’s man,” while Jamison is a “gay-as-the-day-is-long” man. Their relationship is set up as a microcosm of national politics. As they travel from Indiana to Missouri, Jamison sees himself, his father, and the people and places they visit facing decline. Though his observations often rely on knee-jerk assumptions that he overturns with surface musings, his experiences soften him, and he’s able to connect with other people’s frustrations, hopelessness, and hospitality.

At its best, *Hillbilly Queer* picks at the American cultural fiction of a monolithic heartland filled with stereotypical blue collar people. Underneath the scab of his own childhood alienation, Jamison is able to rediscover nuance in what he’s left behind. His own prejudices are reformed as he discovers that the people and places he’s fossilized in his memory have continued to change and move on, just like he has—albeit in ways that depart from, and converge with, his own choices.

Jamison states that his greatest wish is to “cause harm to no one.” Thus, the memoir lends itself to the idea that unity and reconciliation require letting go of accountability. While this strategy works in the narrative in regards to his father-son connection, it’s suspect to extrapolate it much further. However, when it’s paying homage to Jamison’s relationship with his father, *Hillbilly Queer* hits its stride.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (May / June 2021)

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