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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ BIOGRAPHY

Hinsdale: The Summer of '58

Donald Kirk
Sweetwater Stagelines (May 2009)
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Today's families tend to gaze upon the childhoods of the 1950s as shimmering weeks of pure kid fun complete with adventure danger limitless candy and minimal parental supervision. A far cry from the scheduled summer weeks of contemporary youth. Apparently parents in the '50s didn't worry about kidnappers and molesters food poisoning and poison ivy broken bones and broken windows. Children were welcome to roam their own neighborhoods even the swampy parts until dinner time.

Donald Kirk captures this nostalgic feeling of endless summer in his memoir about his own boyhood *Hinsdale: The Summer of '58*. Ten-year-old Donald along with boyhood pals Pat and Larry dabble in the mysteries of the Ouija board fish for man-eating piranhas in the swamp and build competing candy machines for fun and profit. Keenly watching are the neighborhood kids including the Nickerson twins and their dollies who tend to always be in the wrong place at the wrong time like in the back of Donald's soapbox car as it's racing uncontrollably toward the aforementioned swamp.

Kirk who has written several other books for children and adults ably captures boys' spontaneous enthusiasm for the next adventure. His characters are recognizable; we've seen them before in books like Bill Bryson's *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* and movies like *Stand By Me* but they never seem to lose their attraction. It's an age and time many long to return to. *Hinsdale* will be enjoyed best by people who remember that era.

Kirk has a knack for choosing stories that will best affect his readers. When Donald and Larry find themselves cornered by a madman in the camp washhouse their only escape through the clean-out door behind the toilet readers will be truly disgusted when Donald falls in. "I was in it! Yuck! Up to my waist in…Ahhhh! I was about to puke my stomach turning over as I tried to hold my breath—holding it holding it I knew I would just die if I took in the foul air. Finally I had to take that breath putrid air came in and up came my dinner and maybe my lunch too."

The grammatically incorrect dialect which Kirk uses liberally offers more distraction than it does authenticity and the stories occasionally lapse into worn predictability. Pencil drawings by the author add a nice touch to text that is functional rather than inspired. As a whole the book succeeds in providing an afternoon of chuckles as readers witness the evolution not only of growing boys but of a neighborhood perhaps of an entire country.
(August 21, 2009)

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