

Hitchhiking After Dark: Offbeat Stories from a Small Town

Richard Hill

Gale Force Press (October 2010)

Softcover \$17.95 (192pp)

978-0-9817371-9-5

Richard Hill's memories of his childhood growing up in northern Michigan's Sault Sainte Marie are the basis for this entertaining and engaging book. Hill's mother and father believed that renting a house was preferable to buying one. As a result, they moved their family every few years to a new home, making for a life of continuous upheaval.

What kept the author sane? "In some respects, storytelling was our main defense, our way of dealing with some of the rude jolts and random disappointments of daily life," he writes. "By laughing at ourselves, we were able to rise above any uncomfortable situation."

Indeed, Richard Hill does laugh at himself, his family, and his friends—in fact, he laughs at just about everyone he meets and everything that happens to him. Armed with this abundant sense of humor and keen observation, he weaves stories that are at times poignant and often laugh-out-loud funny.

"Fred's Brother," for example, is a classic tale of life in the Hill household after Richard's father retires from the Army and a local newspaper job. The author's mother made a shopping list for his father, specifying that she wanted him to buy "three pounds of Maxwell House coffee, not that cheap Eight O'Clock crap."

The author says he watched his father unload the groceries one morning. "He was dumping a bag of Eight O'Clock coffee into an old Maxwell House can, and had just thrown the empty bag in the trash as Mom walked in the room. She spied the large can of Maxwell House and nodded her approval. Dad looked over at me, winked, and moseyed off to do his puzzle."

The title of the story, "Fred's Brother," by the way, comes from the fact that Hill's father seemed incapable of remembering his name, since there were five children in the household. He'd simply address Richard as "Fred's brother." But Hill takes it in stride. "By referring to me as Fred's brother," he writes, "at least he knew I was still a member of the family."

Hitchhiking After Dark is essentially a collection of humorous vignettes, with a dose of good old-fashioned philosophy sprinkled in, that focus on the quaintness of small-town life. No, this is not a unique approach. But it is Richard Hill's ability to spin each amusing tale so well that makes this book enjoyable reading.

BARRY SILVERSTEIN (November 19, 2010)

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