



Honest Sid: Memoir of a Gambling Man

Ronald Probst

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Ronald Probst's engaging memoir of his gambler father is likely to find favor with a large audience. Tightly edited and concisely written, the book commemorates Probst's parents against the backdrop of Depression-Era New York City. It is also the story of Probst's own rise to become the author of ten critically acclaimed nonfiction books, an inventor, and now the Ford Professor of Engineering, Emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The attractive cover image of the first scene of Damon Runyon's *Guys and Dolls* captures the reader's attention immediately and sets the historical tone of the book. As reinforcement, each aptly titled chapter begins with a quote from the lyrics of a popular song of the times. These excerpts then provide the themes for Probst's recollections of his family's occasional fortunes but more frequent misadventures.

Probst's memories of Sid, his risk-taking father, and Sally, his long-suffering "Mrs. Fix-it" mother, are open and honest and told with an admirable blend of drama, love, and humor. Due to the author's skillful and evocative storytelling, it is easy to accept the family and to empathize with the eternally optimistic "Honest Sid"—despite his many missteps as a husband and father, and his arrests and convictions for bookmaking and scalping.

Probst succeeds in linking chapters and sections of his book with backstories, foreshadowing, and suspense. He adeptly describes his, at times, Dickensian settings and characters, and the dialog between the main players is spot-on. In addition, Probst is a master at blending historical events such as the Great Wall Street Crash, World War I, World War II, and Prohibition with scenes involving his family and the Broadway sights, songs, and shows of the day. He also includes memorable stories of kids "grate fishing," of missing an opportunity as a movie stand-in for Spanky McFarland of *Our Gang* fame, and of the bookmaking math games he played with his dad. Probst writes of the notable individuals he knew and met—ranging from his own Uncle Oscar to Cardinal Spellman, Albert Einstein, Nick the Greek, Harry the Horse, and Jake the Plumber.

Honest Sid died of a heart attack at age fifty-nine. He was proof positive, Probst wistfully concludes, of Damon Runyon's claim that, "All horse players die broke." Sid certainly did, but his son has given both father and mother the legacy of a poignant and well-written memorial.

M. WAYNE CUNNINGHAM (February 16, 2012)

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