ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

It Only Happens Now and Then...
Mary Hamilton
Hamilton House
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Born in 1935, in Brooklyn, New York, Mary P. Hamilton grew up with a positive attitude in a warm, tightly knit, Irish-American family. Her memoir reflects just how fortunate her life has been: She regales readers with stories of her two brothers, her Irish immigrant parents, her close circle of Catholic school friends, and her husband and four sons. Surrounded by people who prize wittiness, Hamilton's own quick wit is clearly evident in her writing.

After doing well in high school, Hamilton decided her career goal was to be a wife and mother. And she achieved her goal, but first she worked as a secretary and had what she calls a "frivolous time" going out dancing and trying her luck on the 1950s New York dating scene.

She met her future husband at work, and the couple courted for six years before marrying. While some of Hamilton's ideas might be considered old-fashioned or politically incorrect, she states her beliefs with frankness, especially given the time and circumstance of her upbringing. "My parents were not concerned with educating me," she writes. "[My father] believed that women would be happier if they had a husband, home, and children, and as I look back on it, I think he was right. Of course, that was in the 1950s, and times have changed."

Gifted with a winning, engaging voice that remains cheerful and honest, even when relating a sad or melancholy story, Hamilton is a born storyteller. Starting with her parents' courtship in Ireland in the 1920s and their immigration to the United States, her story spans decades. Yet, her memoir is tightly written and fairly well edited, so the reader isn't bogged down in dry, historical facts. Sometimes information is repeated unnecessarily, but Hamilton generally knows what to tell and what to leave out, and her tone always remains conversational and focused.

Hamilton wrote her memoir with her seventeen grandchildren as the intended audience, but the book is accessible to all readers, particularly those who have an interest in the Irish-American experience or a typical post-World War II upbringing in Brooklyn. The title of the book is based on a poem Hamilton's husband wrote about how rare and special their love is for one another and how blessed they've been.

Olivia Boler