Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

Letters to Zerky: A Father's Legacy to a Lost Son and a Road Trip Around the World

Bill Raney
JoAnne Walker Raney
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Five Stars (out of Five)

Both Bill Raney and his wife JoAnne traveled extensively before meeting each other in San Fransisco, falling in love, marrying in Reno, and adopting a newborn boy, Zerky. So when they discovered an excess of time on their hands after selling JoAnne's movie theater, it felt natural to pack up and take off to the far corners of the world.

During 1967 and 1968, the Raneys—Bill, JoAnne, Zerky, and Tarzan, a dachshund—traveled the open roads of Europe and Asia in their mostly trusty VW van; occasionally, there were no roads at all, like when they drove around Iran's Great Sand Desert. "Our rough and occasionally nearly indiscernible road through the desert is sometimes more visible on the map than on the desert floor," Raney writes in a letter to his son. They made friends with fellow travelers and locals, ate ethnic meals and many jars of Legume-Boeuf-Foie de Veau, and confronted their ever present fear of running out of diapers. Because Zerky was too young to remember any of his travels, his parents faithfully recorded the trip with humor, candor, vivid descriptions, and content interesting enough that even strangers will find much to love in the resulting book.

Sometimes danger lurked outside the thin walls of their VW van. One cold night in eastern Turkey a crowd of armed soldiers surrounded their camp and insisted they pack up and move. When the soldiers caught sight a soundly sleeping baby they suffered a change of heart and transformed into benevolent night guards. All over the world, people the Raneys met were enamored of Zerky, a little blond boy on a big adventure.

Raney's writing isn't always polished, and he occasionally succumbs to an over-abundance of exclamation points. Mostly, though, he writes in a clear, friendly manner—a style well suited to warming readers to this small family camped in exotic, sometimes hostile places.

When the family suffers various tragedies, readers will grip the pages more tightly in sympathy. Raney also excels at blending brief histories with actual experience in his effort to teach an older Zerky about how the world works.

JoAnne's contributions—her brief journal entries—manage to be both illuminating and mysterious. Always the mother, her journal reveals several cases of inconvenient sickness, eternal trouble with tires, and the difficulty of finding playmates for Zerky within the Indian concept of caste. Her talent for making deft connections is revealed in phrases like, "Their clothes, both the men's and the women's, are as bright as their lives appear to be uncomplicated."

Photographs and maps provide a further element of authenticity and relevancy.

At its heart, *Letters To Zerky* is about the love of a family. Many parents have longed to chuck aside daily drudgery and show their children the world in all its glory. The Raney family had the courage to do just that, and the literary world is richer for it.