Clarion Review

Historical

Living on the Edge
Rondo Barnes
BookSurge
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Two Stars (out of Five)

Robert S. Bender lingers through his remaining days at Denton High School at a local diner with friends—at one point, participating in a gang fight with "Jesters, Dukes, and Blades"—before attending Cornell University as an English major, graduating into Army service at Nürnberg, Germany and then Saigon, South Vietnam with the 716th Military Police Battalion, and finally settling in San Francisco after the war. Amidst the drug-fueled haze of Haight-Ashbury and hippie counterculture of 1967, Robert begins to rethink both his role in the war and his new "hip bohemian lifestyle": "Yet, as much as I came to believe in the spirit of the peace movement…there also existed a tacit awareness that it too was tainted by the universal schizophrenia of the human factor…with all its foibles, pettiness and self-delusion." After dealing with the cumulative effect of death, tragedy, and loss, Robert relapses into drug use to cope with alienation, despite his determination to stop.

A very personal story silhouetted by '60s period music as if with silver cord, *Living on the Edge* is painted in dazzling prose, yet remains static and disarranged, with superfluous characters and events dominating a passive environment. Clarity is lost on assumptions as to subjective information in the story. Like Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* without the road, the journey takes the reader through an array of colorful, spontaneous scenes and characters replete with drug or alcohol-induced hallucinations and introspection.

In rare moments, the 392 page novel is graced by poignant prose and significant cultural details. To the reader, narrator/protagonist Robert is difficult to categorize and often comes across as empty and two-dimensional, wholly dependent on friends or memories to prove his central existence; however, in rare moments, such as in the following, the prose defines the emotion of Robert as a character: "My own blood curdled in my veins. Billy. Billy Riggins…Dying right here in this godforsaken alley, this worthless world of corruption and

exploitation, filth and starvation, deadly desperation and everlasting hopelessness." Despite his experience with war and with Vietnam-era San Francisco during the Summer of Love, Robert never develops an emotional appeal toward humanity. He is contacted by an old girlfriend but just as he finds happiness, the terrible nightmares of "Janis and Jimi singing in a psychedelic din of death" begin. Robert's detachment and instability vacillates throughout the novel and inevitably into the obscure drug-fueled climax.

Living on the Edge, the debut novel by Rondo Barnes, will appeal to those interested in post-traumatic stress disorder or life during the rock-and-roll era of the 50s and 60s.

Derek Cram