FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ GENERAL FICTION

Merit Badges

Kevin Fenton
New Issues Poetry Prose (April 2011)
Softcover $15.00 (233pp)
978-1-936970-03-2

Memories consist of momentary flashes, glimpses of the profound and mundane events that became more than mere moments in time; they defined us. *Merit Badges*, an unconventional read by Kevin Fenton, feels like rummaging through someone's private keepsake box: a glimpse of a photo here, a tiny memento there; more intimate that a photo album, but not nearly as complete as a diary. And as the rummager digs, the menagerie merges to reveal who the collector is.

Fenton peeks into the lives of a few friends in a small Minnesota town, from their middle-school days into adulthood. Alternating between each person's perspective, memories explore the things that formed them—from the town they grew up in and the pain they experienced to the people they knew. An evening at a theater, a summer afternoon swimming at a quarry, or a night spent in jail. Each chapter, loosely themed on Boy Scout merit badges, contains the memory of a life-transforming moment.

There's Quint King, whose father died when he was young and who struggles to deal with the loss through a mire of drugs, alcohol, and rebellion. There's "Slow" Slocum, whose parents divorce and who takes on too much responsibility too soon. There's "Chimes" Sanborn, a latch-key kid who finds solace and home in a bowling alley. And there's Barb, an almost bitter girl who somehow attracts the harsh side of men and moves from schoolyard teasing to an abusive relationship.

The book travels an often raw road. Though centered on a childhood theme, issues of drugs, alcohol, abuse, and more make this a very adult book. The characters prove fascinating, although their voices occasionally could be more distinct. Immersed in their own struggles, some seem oblivious to the pain their friends suffer and one longs for someone to open their eyes, recognize someone else's troubles, and reach out, perhaps finding strength for both to get through. It's a powerful life lesson.

The question of what makes us who we are merges with the unanswered question of what might happen if someone cared, or if someone saw and showed us the way. Instead, most carry our burdens and struggle to find our way alone. As Quint says in this book, "I start walking, but I think that maybe, somehow, I got turned around, and I'm not sure I'm going in the right direction."

DIANE GARDNER (April 28, 2011)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The author of this book provided free copies of the book and paid a small fee to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. Foreword Reviews and Clarion Reviews make no guarantee that the author will receive a positive review. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.