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Clarion Review

Mountain Ash

Elna Fone Nugent
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Ordinary lives have intrinsic value, not only to their owners, but also to those who may read the memoirs that sprout from stories about family, friends, work, travel, and health issues.

Mountain Ash is the story of Elna Fone Nugent, from her birth in Andover, Massachusetts, to the most recent stage of her life—days spent caring for her sick husband of forty-seven years. With wit and imagination, she reports on her history, her family, her friends, and her thoughts.

As a child, Elna discovered she had a hypersensitivity to noise, plus an active imagination. This combination seemed to make her sympathetic to the various colorful characters that populated her world. Nugent spins delightful tales of her courtship with and marriage to Jack Nugent, the arrival of their four children, their family trips, and stories about their many friends.

Nugent has experienced moments of spirituality that seem to be intrinsically connected to her sensitivity to sound and her ability to play almost anything on the piano after only hearing it once. Throughout the narrative, she highlights her spiritual awakenings, her discovery of past lives, her research into astrology, and her intuition which has rarely led her in the wrong direction.

Reading Mountain Ash is like sitting down to tea with Nugent, a former newspaper columnist. Her chatty tone complements her stories of daily life during decades when family life wasn't dominated by computer screens and cell phones. Her sense of humor springs forth as well: "We enjoyed indulging in the famous steaks at Manero's restaurant at a time when we were oblivious to the fallout that could occur from marbled red meat," she writes. "Even if we had known, we wouldn't have cared, because we were neophytes and never doubted the instant gratification of a great sirloin."

Mountain Ash attempts in one volume to cover several subjects that may be due their own concentrated effort. Nugent seems to have enough material for several memoirs; indeed, she writes several asides that say so. Her approach to her own spirituality could easily fill another book, as could her trials in caring for her husband as he slips into dementia. As it stands, the book feels almost distracted with itself; a few chapters even veer off in discussion of historical subjects that may be dear to Nugent's heart, but that serve as an impediment to a cohesive text. Within chapters, as well, Nugent follows tangents that have no real place in her narrative.

Despite a few textual issues, Mountain Ash is a sweet, gentle read. Nugent knows that quiet lives can offer a rich slice of experience that readers may learn from.

ANDI DIEHN (May 18, 2010)

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