

Next O&W Train from Tennessee

J. R. Holbrook

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Slices of life set against the backdrop of rural America reveal the human side of one family, disclosing personal experiences that impacted everyone and left a mark on this nation's history. J. R. Holbrook's *Next O&W Train from Tennessee* is a compilation of vignettes—highly personalized glimpses of a time gone by.

The first half of the book is composed of nineteen pieces that include personality sketches, subtle revelations, and straightforward events. Educational as well as candid, these prosaic and visual frozen moments allow one to experience the ordinary aspects of living along with the upheaval of change. The book's second half is a collection of black-and-white photographs of Holbrook's ancestors, along with brief captions.

Holbrook uses words with precision, providing a clear picture of the situation he has chosen to depict, as in this picturesque scenario:

School was about one and a half miles away from their farm, and many times, the Wright children would walk this distance down a dusty trail, carrying two or three books with them through a green brush of trees and meadows, needing to wade across the rocks of a creek in order to get to school.<

The author's renderings are comparable to rich, articulate journal entries: "From night to night, the Wright family would sometimes hear things of pure wonder or feel things during a warm black evening under a vast array of stars." The writing is purposeful and subjective, seeking not to flaunt or to sell but simply to describe what matters most to a family. Sincere and informative, this sensitive look at Holbrook's ancestry may attract historians searching for material on a period, a place, or a population.

The book has strong literary qualities in carefully wrought phrases. Holbrook has a gift for rendering scenes with down-to-earth realism, satisfying the longing for everyday naturalness and spontaneity as opposed to using attention-grabbing words for shock value. The back cover blurb is somewhat awkward yet personable, discussing lineage more than content, leaving one to wonder whether this complicated bio may have been written for lighthearted effect. The unusual approach could be a stumbling block, however, and may invoke an amused rather than an intrigued response to the synopsis of his family tree.

Next O&W Train from Tennessee is Holbrook's second short story collection. His style will appeal to an audience that enjoys meandering down quaint country lanes and sleeping under a blanket of moonlight on sultry summer nights.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (December 1, 2014)

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