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Old, Gay & Fabulous: A Memoir

Ken Sofronski
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In *Old, Gay & Fabulous*, first-time author Ken Sofronski begins by describing his early life growing up in a working-class, single-parent Philadelphia home with a closeted lesbian mother, employing a combination of wry humor, sarcastic wit, sadness, and sometimes, an almost childlike wonder to the telling of his tale. A good storyteller, Sofronski, who was born in 1938, peppers his accounts with lively details; recounting a time at the bedside of his dying grandmother, he writes: "She was propped up in bed, and she had long white hair that was turning yellow. She motioned for me to come closer, and I did. She barely spoke above a whisper, but she said, 'Kenny, you are royalty. You are a direct descendant of Catherine the Great, mother of all Russia. One day you will be a queen.' I said, 'I know, grandmom.'"

Never a stellar student, Sofronski decided to pursue an acting career, but whether in New York or Los Angeles, work was hard to come by; his appearances in several New York stage productions and in films that include Martin Scorcese's *Mean Streets*, as well as *Julie & Julia*, *The Witches of Oz*, and *Hard to Watch* did not keep him from going hungry. He became a court reporter to earn a living.

Loneliness is a major theme of Sofronski's memoir. While frequent outings to bathhouses and bars initiated him into sex and drugs, they did little to alleviate his feelings of alienation. His search for "different principles" to live by, after realizing that "debauchery wasn't working" for him any longer, provides fair warning that such things do not bring lasting happiness. Epic events in gay history like the Stonewall Riots and the AIDS epidemic, the rise of the human potential movement in America, and the horrific events of September 11, 2001, are briefly touched upon, mainly as they affected the author.

Sofronski provides a good, if somewhat insular, picture of what life was like for many gay men in America in the second half of the twentieth century. While his account is entertaining, readers may find themselves wishing for fewer passages about mindless sex, and more commentary on a society of which the author could say, as AIDS became epidemic, "…in the beginning, nobody gave a damn if the faggots were dying."

Although the cover, a picture of the author as a young man, is appealing, the gold label stating that the book is a "Pulitzer Prize Contender" may be seen as an attempt to elevate it in the eyes of potential readers who may not know that submitting the book together with the appropriate forms and a required entrance fee is all that is required by the Pulitzer Prize organization to be a "contender." It would also be appropriate to identify the writer of the laudatory statements about the memoir that appear in the beginning of the book.

Sofronski offers readers something that he did not have access to in his day: The story of a young man who came to terms with his sexual orientation, found kindred souls, and managed to make his way in the world. While he suffered a long period of depression along the way, Sofronski found the help he needed to declare himself "old, gay, and fabulous."

KRISTINE MORRIS (April 27, 2011)

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