Clarion Review

Spiritual

Pastor: A Fictional Reminiscence with Conversations on Religion and Society
James Stanley Barlow
AuthorHouse
978-1-4817-1190-6
Two Stars (out of Five)

Warm sentiments in this fictionalized account of the author's life as a pastor honor the humility of the profession.

Pastor: A Fictional Reminiscence with Conversations on Religion and Society by James Stanley Barlow is a fictional account of the author's own life and ministry. It's a story of love and belief despite difficulties and loss. While truthful and open, it wholeheartedly affirms the vocation.

"Fictional Reminiscence" is the perfect phrase to capture the uniqueness of this book: the story follows the fictional account of Bob and Sally Staten's lives, but it's clear to readers that Barlow is really remembering his own life through the Statens.

Beyond that defining phrase, the book doesn't give readers an adequate sense of whether it is based on actual events. There is a short epigraph at the beginning of the book, "Bob and Sally Staten are living now, well into the 21st Century. Here is a slice of their life, from the 1950's." This would better serve readers if it was developed into an introduction. The quote from Robert Staten that follows the epigraph needs context to help readers understand who he is and what he's talking about. Readers will feel like they're being dropped into the middle of a life, but they may not be sure why.

The narrative will be most easily read and understood by pastors who were working around the same time; in a way, it reads like an inside joke, a friendly reminiscence, or even a bit of commiseration. Churchgoers will understand what the author is talking about, but may feel the level of detail is at times self-indulgent, which, in some cases, could cause the author's goal of honoring the profession to backfire, inducing readers to grow impatient with what sometimes feels like a need for validation from the characters.

When Sally says, “[Y]ou’re taking yourself too seriously. I can see a wee bit of arrogance in a guy who looks at this [situation] the way you do,” she echoes a sentiment readers may feel creep in throughout the book. This is one of the major ways readers’ responses will vary between pastors and laypeople: pastors will see Bob’s humility and goodwill; laypeople may feel a bit of tension or even irritation.

The writing is clear, positive, and warm but occasionally overuses certain syntactical forms like adverbial and adjectival introductory phrases. For example, “A retired bookkeeper, wearing gold-rimmed glasses, he liked to come over and help out in the office. Still sandy-haired, with some patches of gray, he probably was no older than seventy-two. Not one to make conversation readily, he nevertheless seemed always to be in a pleasant mood.” The author also uses single quotation marks for emphasis or to quote from common phrasings—for example, ‘job-analysis’ and ‘benevolences.’

The author’s nostalgia for his real life and profession come across as unoriginal in fiction. For example, in fondly recounting stories of old friends, the character sounds a bit gushy, and the sentiments don’t have the depth that fiction readers expect. Many readers may wonder why the book was not a memoir, with names changed where needed, but pastors looking back on their own careers will find a friend in Barlow and his book.

Melissa Wuske