Clarion Review

General

Play It Straight
Brendan Broderick
Epigram Press
978-1-4759-2485-5
Four Stars (out of Five)

"Life don't take prisoners," a boozy, washed-up screen legend tells a young man trying to break into the film industry in the late 1990s. "Success is mostly luck, kid. That and showing up."

The main character of Brendan Broderick's *Play it Straight* is the kid to whom the old movie star dishes out those words of wisdom. The antagonist is a budding screenwriter, one who will do any task, no matter how strange or demeaning, to get his foot in the door of a Hollywood studio.

The studio is an old B-movie grindhouse factory based on the kind that provided endless and forgettable low-budget grist for the drive-in movie and low-rent urban theaters both long since torn down and replaced with strip malls and coffee shops. Commodore Pictures is limping along, churning out forgettable schlock starring D-list celebrities long past their prime. It is into this world that Broderick thrusts what the reader can only imagine is his alter ego, James Flynn, a New Yorker who in his late twenties flees the East Coast for the West Coast in hopes of jump-starting his life and career.

If Broderick is not writing a pseudo-autobiography, he is to be commended for both the detail and the emotions he has imagined and packed into his novel. There are touches of *Sunset Boulevard*, *Barton Fink*, *Ed Wood*, and *In a Lonely Place* in his book. Broderick's James Flynn is a believable and identifiable character.

Flynn is but one of a large cast of colorful characters, some of whom show up for only a few pages, paragraphs, or lines. Some have only first names (like twins Riva and Ziva, the septuagenarian ex-hippies who are the wardrobe and makeup departments at Commodore) or nicknames (like Lunch Meat, the studio's caterer).

The most intriguing and most mysterious of all of Broderick's characters, however, is the enigmatic founder and head of Commodore, Gordon Luker. Part recluse, part genius, part

pioneer, and part angry has-been, Luker is also the elusive quarry of Flynn's effort to further his own career.

Told without glamour yet still with a bit of awe, *Play it Straight* is an excellent, thoroughly believable, no-holds-barred account of the seedy side of the movie business in the late 1990s. The characters are alive and the situations, both comic and serious, seem drawn from real-life experiences. The plot moves nicely from incident to incident, without seeming forced or otherwise artificially propelled by unbelievable constructions.

There is one subplot involving a woman referred to as "She" (and sometimes as "Her"), the former love of Flynn's life from the East Coast, that is not fully resolved. It seems like a detour in a story that otherwise travels in the fast lane, but Broderick eventually gets back on the freeway to finish the tale. All in all, *Play it Straight* is a fine bit of fiction.

Mark McLaughlin