Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

Sailing the Mystery
Ed Merck
FriesenPress
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Connecting to humanity in subtle ways and delivering refreshing insights into relationships and aging, this memoir details a year at sea in a conversational tone.

Sailing the Mystery is comfortable and conversational, the way sharing a bottle of wine with a good friend might be. With a solid chronology to keep it on track, Ed Merck weaves through a lifetime of what it means to be human, condensed into the few years it took him to sail up and down the East Coast. The end of Merck's marriage, the independence of his son, and the end of his professional career propelled him into a life of discovery, introspection, and connectedness.

In his sixties, Merck decides to sell everything and buy a sailboat, with the intention of sailing from Florida to Martha's Vineyard and back over the course of the year. It is obvious his new life and his story will be about transformation, but he raises the question of how much a life can be changed when so much of it has already been lived. Thankfully, he hasn't polished all of the edges, and there are still expected mistakes, bumped heads, bruised egos, and occasional sparkles of humor keeping this work from getting drowsy. His relationships with everyone from his son to his yoga instructors and online paramours are all thoughtfully delivered and refreshingly real. Even Kairos, the boat, and the ocean herself are spiritual teachers with quiet personalities.

Merck's writing is well-crafted, beautiful, and sincere. When he tends toward self-indulgence, the momentum of the story pulls him back on track. The frequent quotations pulled from the text and highlighted in framed boxes are often distracting. If more time had lapsed between the journey and the composition of the book, some of the heavy-handed concepts might have been more palatable, but, despite repetition and moments of over-writing, there is still

valuable insight in the final few chapters.

Growing older is inevitable, and it is happening to everyone at every moment. But not everyone makes the choice to do it with purpose. For those who are fortunate enough to still have dreams to dust off in the last third of their lives, *Sailing the Mystery* will help see their value. For those muddling through the middle third, it will help them feel less afraid of life's trajectory. Most remarkably, although Merck often writes about loneliness, reading *Sailing the Mystery* connects to humanity in subtle, graceful ways. He went on the journey for himself, but he wrote the book for the rest of us.

Sara Budzik