Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

Spider's Web: Memoirs of "Spider" Weiss
Norman Weiss
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Two Stars (out of Five)

Early on in his memoir Norman Weiss recalls hearing his father talk about a Chinese fortune cookie he received. The strip of paper tucked inside the cookie read: “You should have a very interesting life.” Although his father believed the phrase to be a curse, Weiss prefers to interpret the fortune less pessimistically, recognizing the blessings in his life as well as the curses. In *Spider’s Web*, Weiss describes the most distinctive moments of his interesting life, including his missteps and good fortune.

Weiss notes that his purpose in writing the memoir isn’t just to share the particulars of the 85 years of his life—he readily admits that he’s lost details for many of the stories he shares—but to provide some thoughts on the United States from one citizen’s perspective. While he believes that his generation has taken steps to remedy many of the ills that have afflicted the nation, he also believes that many issues remain unresolved. He also wrote his memoir for his late son, who had once asked Weiss to write his life story.

Weiss tackles the task chronologically, beginning with his childhood in Pennsylvania during the 1930s, where his Jewish family mingled with people from different immigrant groups and economic classes. He later attended West Point (where he earned his nickname, “Spider”), served in the U.S. Army, and entered corporate life, weathering a series of financial storms on his way to success.

Particularly interesting is Weiss’s discussion of race relations, especially instances at West Point and in the Army that involved discrimination against African Americans. His experiences offer an important glimpse of racist behavior during that era and how someone like Weiss, who’d grown up with people of different races, reacted to it.

For example, while at West Point, the Cadet First Captain told all new cadets not to talk to a black cadet and to exclude him from all activities. Weiss notes, “I felt I had been kicked in

the stomach at this. I had gone to grade school with blacks and never given a thought to segregation." Soon after, Weiss experiences his own discrimination when a cadet overseer says that he disapproves of Jews at the Academy and vows to have Weiss expelled within the first year.

Although his tales do have occasional lyrical flow, Weiss tends to stick with straightforward narration unadorned by much description or literary phrasing. This can make many passages feel choppy and bare. Often, he relates events without exploring how he felt about them or whether they had any deeper meaning beyond the immediate situation.

When he does opine on a topic, such as all of the lucky breaks he's received in his life, his observations are elevated above basic recollection; unfortunately, this doesn't occur often enough. While Weiss's memoir does contain stories of love, loss, luck, and resilience, it does not offer enough feeling or contemplation to make it stand out from the pack.

Elizabeth Millard