Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

Stop Crying and Listen to the Music
Gary Tannus Nassif
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Three Stars (out of Five)

From his time working as a salad boy in the broiling kitchens of his father's restaurant in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to his career as an up-and-coming entertainer in the smoky lounges of Las Vegas showrooms, it's clear Gary Nassif has led a full and varied life. But his range of success—from teacher to artist to singer—has always been overshadowed by his father's inexplicable antagonism and rage. Haunted by memories of emotional and psychological abuse, Nassif began a memoir—a "psychological autopsy" where he attempts to dissect his sticky relationship with his father while revisiting the most poignant moments of his journey to becoming a world-class entertainer.

Written over a seven-year period, this memoir is expansive; it covers over five decades of memories, beginning with the Nassif family's immigration to the United States from Lebanon in 1925. Adhering to a chronological timeframe, Nassif details his childhood growing up in a Lebanese-American community in 1940s' Iowa and progresses through each stage of his life—from dreamy adolescent sitting mesmerized in the local theatre, to struggling young singer in Las Vegas on the brink of success. The sheer breadth of material does not dissuade Nassif from withholding detail—these are not brief, backhand glances at fading memories. Readers are drawn into a world of vivid characters and settings: There are orange haired housekeepers in fancy cars and sultry, smoke-filled cocktail lounges glittering with iconic Hollywood stars—details that work to inject the text with vibrancy and color. At times however, there is clearly an overabundance of information. Nassif has the tendency to descend too frequently into obsessive self-analysis and offers up repetitive depictions of similar events that disturb the fluidity of the text. Other than chronology, there seems to be no overarching structure guiding the flow of information. Memories are visited and re-visited as they occur to the author in disjointed, haphazard form.

One of the main strengths of this book is the incredibly sensitive depiction of Nassif's lifelong struggle with a speech impediment. Frozen by his inability to speak at will, Nassif's stuttering is at its worst when he is in the presence of his overbearing and critical father. In a particularly poignant scene, he answers the telephone in the presence of friends and relatives and is mortified when he can't say "hello": "My distress from Dad's stares panicked me to open my mouth and jerk my head, while I tried to force the sound out. Now, my thoughts became pleas. 'Just say anything, hello, yes, good day, good evening, yeah, anything, Gary!'" Nassif's rendering of particularly painful moments helps readers immediately empathize and make an emotional connection with the text.

With clear depictions of his father's intimidation, the deep resentment Nassif expresses for his father can be understood. However, the constant reiteration of this anger and discontent becomes a steady refrain repeated on almost every page of the book. Nassif's repetitive accusations against his father—however valid and true—become tiring. They lose their vibrancy and Nassif's narrative voice takes on a decidedly whiny tone.

Although this memoir could greatly benefit from thorough restructuring and refinement, it has obvious merit. It is a richly layered narrative that sheds light on the complexities of realizing dreams and would appeal to any reader eager for a glimpse into the world of dream making and show business.

Shoilee Khan