

Summer of '63

Rodger Aidman

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"History is a relentless master. It has no present, only the past rushing into the future. To try to hold fast is to be swept aside."—John F. Kennedy

John F. Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963, shocked the world and ended our nation's innocent idealism. His death was the harbinger of darker days to come. Rodger Aidman's novel, *Summer of '63*, captures in stunning detail the summer before Kennedy's assassination through the eyes of thirteen-year-old Rodger Noodleman. Along with early sixties pop-culture references, Aidman portrays an era when World War II is still fresh in the minds of people reluctant to change with the times and desperate to guard a southern version of a Norman Rockwell existence. Yet, in their hearts, they know that change is inevitable.

The novel begins with young Noodleman's bar mitzvah. Through the use of first-person narrative in his protagonist's voice, the author introduces the vibrant cast of characters that make up Rodger's friends and family and, in the process, offers a history lesson. Aidman writes, "...Grandma and Grandpa Wise, had come to Ohio from Poland as teenagers, seeking religious freedom and safety from the pogroms. They arrived in the golden land together at Ellis Island, under the protective gaze of the Statue of Liberty."

Cliff Glick, a character who physically resembles Rodger, intercepts envelopes of bar mitzvah money, gifts to Rodger from his family and friends who mistake Glick for him. After he is confronted and returns the money, Glick asks Rodger what he plans to do with the money. Rodger replies, "Travel, man. Mom and Dad said I could take a trip to Texas to visit my relatives after school's out for summer...I get to travel all by myself. Now that I'm officially a man, it's time to see the world." One immediately realizes that Aidman is writing about a lost epoch by demonstrating how much the world changed between 1963 and 2011. To allow a thirteen-year-old boy to travel on a bus by himself from Miami to Texas today would be unthinkable.

Before Rodger embarks on his trip he uses a restroom at the bus station and observes that there are four different restrooms in the terminal, "There were four bathrooms..." "White Men", "White Women", "Colored Men" and "Colored Women". Segregated bathrooms. I wondered if they were separate but equal. I didn't have the nerve to go into the colored bathroom and see for myself...Why would anyone even care if a black man used a white toilet?" Aidman makes these sorts of observations through the novel, powerful statements that do not overpower the story. He provides plenty of humor and adventure for Rodger, too, including a make-out session with two girls under a dock and an encounter with a twelve-foot alligator named "Old Pete." The author addresses adolescent sexuality with the same insight evident in his political and socioeconomic remarks.

The narrative also holds a bit of magic and mystery for the reader, when Rodger encounters characters with the same names as historic figures who will shape events of 1963 and beyond. For example, the author mentions the name Jack Ruby, but the reader doesn't know if this is the same Jack Ruby that would later kill Lee Harvey Oswald.

The balance of history, story, and character found in *Summer of '63* will remind readers of a James Michener novel and, like his works, will remain forever in their minds and hearts.

LEE GORDON (April 26, 2011)

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