

Surviving Life as a Dumbass

Michael E. Webster

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Michael E. Webster begins his memoir by sketching out a suicide attempt and ends it with the words “The Beginning of the End.” This is certainly a pessimistic attitude but as the reader is carried from Webster’s small town upbringing through an alcohol-fueled career in the US Navy the author relates a sufficient number of incidents missteps and black-outs to convince readers that the negative outlook may be warranted.

After Webster finishes high school he briefly attends Purdue University and then joins the navy to become a pilot. A minor problem with the vision in one eye keeps him from qualifying for flying fighters which leads him to choose nuclear training instead of helicopter flight school. But Webster doesn’t end up in the prestigious nuclear submarine service as promised. Instead he’s sent to a Pacific Fleet repair ship.

The author’s naval career is made up of various misadventures and sea stories all fermented in alcohol. Readers may laugh but it quickly becomes evident that Webster learns little from his mistakes.

Done with the Navy Webster returns to Purdue where he secures a pharmacy degree. The remainder of the memoir is far less rollicking perhaps because it’s set in the prosaic and familiar Midwest rather than aboard ship at naval bases or in exotic haunts where bar girls forage in the wallets of drunken sailors.

A dispassionate appraisal of Webster’s story suggests that the root of his problems may not have been the Navy and that alcohol may only be a catalyst. For example during his first stint at Purdue he drives to Terre Haute to visit friends ends up in jail and awakens to be told he’s been accused of rape. That turns out to be a mean-spirited joke by a police officer but Webster learned no lesson. And that’s one criticism of *Surviving Life*. The author displays no introspection at least none other than characterizing himself as a “dumbass.” Most readers approach memoirs seeking depth and reflection.

Color is also lacking here. Readers want characters and scenery painted vividly. Webster does this best when he relates his naval service but his writing needs more physical descriptions of people places and things. For example readers learn little about Webster’s wife a woman he met while attending Purdue the second time and to whom he has remained married for several decades.

Another important criticism of Webster’s effort is that the opening chapters chronicling a suicide attempt seem like a red herring. There is no objective resolution to this sad situation. If three years prior to writing his memoir Webster took a knife to deep veins and retreated to his shower to die readers will expect him to end his book with more closure than is provided by “The Beginning of the End.”

For all its flaws *Surviving Life* is something of a page-turner especially in chronicling the author’s escapades while in the Navy. Memoirs never fail to intrigue when a writer is honest and forthcoming and Webster is that. Readers might close the book wanting to know more about things left unsaid but they will admire Webster’s frankness and his resolve in acknowledging his mistakes.

GARY PRESLEY (March 3, 2009)

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