ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

The Bar Mitzvah and the Beast: One Family's Cross-Country Ride of Passage by Bike
Matt Biers-Ariel
The Mountaineers Books
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The road across country is paved with good intentions in this charming story of an adventurous family that decides to do something special in honor of their oldest son's bar mitzvah. Most Jewish boys about to cross the threshold into manhood are required to do some type of community service project. In this case, Yonah, his parents, Matt and Djina, and younger brother, Solomon, go beyond the pale: their plan is to bicycle from California to Washington, DC, to promote environmental awareness; along the way they seek signatures on a "Petition for Cooling our Planet" to present to Representative Edward Markey, then chair of the House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming.

Matt Biers-Ariel, a public school teacher, chronicles the journey with a mixture of gentle humor and life lessons, not the least of which is overcoming preconceived notions about the types of people they encounter, like the café owner of a broken-down establishment who is remarkably "green" and the hunter who is nevertheless a conservationist.

Of course, not everything can be rosy on a trek that covers 3,804 miles. Man plans, and God laughs, as the Jewish expression goes. There are mechanical difficulties (although remarkably few and relatively simple) and uncomfortable meteorological conditions as they push on through the deserts of the Southwest, but surprisingly few family squabbles given the constant proximity. In addition, given that no one in the family had undertaken such a challenge before, there are few truly dangerous situations posed by sharing roads with motorized vehicles or arriving in unfamiliar locations some might consider a bit scary; after a few chapters, it is evident the author would not keep such information to himself.

Some of the most poignant moments occur when Biers-Ariel and Yonah engage in philosophical conversations about religion. The young man comes across as mature beyond his years and refutes the concept of God with an attitude that would have made Christopher Hitchins proud. Since religion is such a personal issue and its practice is so varying, it's difficult to tell exactly where his father stands.

Aided by the kindness of strangers, as well as friends who pop up at various points on

the way to comfort the family with a good meal or a place to stay (a welcome change from their usual hit-or-miss campground accommodations), the family bikes across the country, succeeding in the goal to deliver the petition (although what impact it would have is questionable), learning a lot about themselves and their country, and consuming so much Gatorade the reader might get the impression the company paid for product placement.?

Ron Kaplan