

The Outrageous Legend of Gordon Zahler, Hollywood's Flashiest Quadriplegic

Chip Jacobs

Behler Publications (Feb 15, 2008)

\$16.95 (336pp)

978-1-933016-47-4

Nearly every family can boast of (or deny) an eccentric relative or two: the quaint aunt who collects purple tea cozies, the screwball cousin who apes the “Three Stooges” at Thanksgiving dinner. In Jacobs’ family, the honor went to his uncle Gordon, though for reasons having nothing to do with whimsical decorating or wacky humor.

Gordon Zahler was a rapid-fire raconteur, an insatiable self-promoter, a globe-trotting businessman. He was also a quadriplegic, the victim of a hair-brained stunt, one of many he staged as an obstreperous teenager growing up in the 1940s.

What started out as a daring gym class diversion ended with Gordon’s comatose body twisted in an unnatural zigzag. What followed were torturous years of life-saving operations, life-threatening infections, and life-challenging psychological despair.

As with all deplorable accidents, the after-effects ricocheted from victim to victim’s family. An accomplished musician, Gordon’s father, Lee, achieved phenomenal success creating original scores for the burgeoning film establishment. Despondent over Gordon’s accident, Lee died young, leaving his family destitute. Using the only parts of his body still vital—his mind and his mouth—Gordon schemed to sell the rights to his father’s music catalog to the nascent TV industry. It was an unlikely and ironic combination: eminently forgettable background music hawked by an inherently unforgettable character.

Gordon’s physical deformity should have doomed him in beauty worshipping, health conscious Hollywood. Yet “Gordon’s will...was mightier than guilt and more enduring than wealth. Team it up with ingenuity and watch the confetti rain down,” Jacobs writes. Had Gordon’s career taken place on the screen instead of behind it, he would have been the Christopher Reeve of his day.

Jacobs’ fascination with Gordon began as a child’s revulsion for his uncle’s broken body and fear of his overbearing personality. Understandable for a young boy harboring his own self-esteem challenges, “the idea that outwardly abnormal people like Gordon could be so firmly confident was confusing. I hadn’t experienced the power you garner from taking a wicked blow only to get up laughing.”

Family memoirs are rife with grandiose tales of triumph over adversity, and while it would be easy to dismiss Jacobs’ portrait of his unorthodox uncle as another such unvarnished encomium, his professional background as an award-winning investigative journalist for *The Los Angeles Times*, *LA Weekly*, and CNN prevents this from being so. With both dramatic flair and detached fairness, Jacobs eloquently reveals the soul of a charismatic and courageous character.

CAROL HAGGAS (December 11, 2007)

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