ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

The Pitcher's Kid: A Memoir
Jack Olsen
Aequitas
978-1-929355-76-1
(September 2011)

Near the end of this book, the author's high school homeroom teacher asks how "the young man with the highest IQ in his room managed to graduate in the bottom three percent of his class." Olsen replied, "It was a long story." Here, Olsen tells that story in a lengthy coming-of-age memoir that will leave the reader wishing it were even longer. A late bloomer, Jack Olsen wrote thirty-three books, including *The Bridge at Chappaquiddick* and *Silence on Monte Sole*. The late author was a former *New York Times* bureau chief, wrote for popular magazines, and authored several highly regarded true-crime books. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* called him "a national treasure."

This entertaining and revealing autobiography shows what being poor was like for a child during the Great Depression and how the author's flawed father additionally strained family relations. Rudolph "Ole" Olsen constructed a life of lies, including his alleged education and baseball career. He was a philanderer and a failure as an insurance adjuster who would waste his meager earnings gambling. Flo Olsen, Jack's mother, said her greatest mistake was marrying Rudolph. Yet, the younger Olsen demonstrates wisdom beyond his years: he never stopped loving his dad and realized that his father's failings were attributed to Rudolph's physically abusive stepmother.

The book describes the family's frequent moves as the Depression and Rudolph's schemes forced them from suburban Philadelphia to the mean streets of Jersey City, where Jack lived with his grandmother, whose only income was welfare. Olsen vividly portrays this harsh life, in which a good meal was half a hotdog and dandelion greens and the public schools are described as prisons run by the inmates. The author, a short outsider, took his lumps.

Fortunately, in 1936 the family moved to West Philadelphia and then to a friendly Drexel Hill neighborhood. The book becomes less somber and downright funny when Olsen shares tales of his teenage rites of passage—raunchy humor abounds. Although he finds his own niche through bowling when he becomes a city doubles champ, most of the author's youth was spent as an underachiever and social outcast. This delightful memoir has a timeless appeal that

allows readers to identify easily with the young Olsen and will find an enthusiastic audience in public libraries.

Karl Helicher