

The Pretenders

Leland J. Katz

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In the realistic novel The Pretenders, the workplace overshadows the personal.

Leland J. Katz's contemporary autobiographical novel *The Pretenders* is a professional coming-of-age story that follows Joel Kramer through the ups and downs of his life in the burgeoning field of computer technology. Like the field itself, Joel experiences rapid change both in his employment and his personal life over the span of fifty years.

The story tracks Joel from his college graduation in 1959 to his retirement in 2011. He is an early entry into the then brand-new profession of high tech, working in its developing years in the 1960s. After serving in the military abroad, in places including Germany and Greece, he and his wife, Julie, return to America. The bulk of the novel focuses on Joel's numerous corporate jumps, business meetings, family life, and personal frustrations.

The third-person narration mostly stays in Joel's head, but it also jumps into the consciousness of other characters at points, disrupting the narrative flow. The narrator remembers every word of every conversation Joel has ever had as well as every outline of every project he has ever worked on. The text's overwhelming details around such subjects slow the already long book down. Multiple asides don't contribute to the story's trajectory.

Interesting incidents and factors arise and might have given more direction to the plot: an infant is deformed by Thalidomide; Joel is Jewish in the professional world of the 1960s and 1970s; he lives through 9/11 and grows old in a profession dominated by breezy millennials and irreverent techies. However, such moments are mentioned only in passing and are never built upon. At times, it seems as if the narrative assumes insider knowledge about the significance of its factors; at others, it spends too inordinate an amount of time on describing long-dormant computer projects that are no longer relevant.

Joel and his steadfast wife, Julie, are endearing characters, especially in their domestic settings. Their development results from their interactions in real-life contexts rather than as drones in the workplace. Their multiple moves for career improvement and their dedication to their family life are rendered with touching earnestness. The text's insistence on covering business meetings, projects, salary negotiations, layoffs, and firings makes such factors dominant, though; relatable scenes are relegated to the margins, and Joel's home and work lives conflict with each other throughout. At times, the story reads more like a detailed transcript of defunct tech business practices.

The story moves forward in time, but without rising action, a climax, or denouement. Spanning over fifty years, it ends with impressionistic nostalgia at Joel's retirement, but without much meaning or resolution.

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PHILIP J. KOWALSKI (September 27, 2018)

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