Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

The Road Taken: by a Child of the Great Depression

Roger L. Youmans
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Four Stars (out of Five)

A missionary doctor whose work took him into the heart of Africa recounts the formative events from his childhood in the heartland of the United States.

The last of six children born to Irene and Raymond Youmans, Roger Youmans, MD, came of age during a time of considerable hardship. Though college educated, his parents still suffered the vicissitudes of the Great Depression, losing the title to their farm as the result of a risky business investment. Learning to make do with limited resources, the Youmans nonetheless thrived amid the tumult of an economic disaster, followed by the hazards of American involvement in World War II. Whatever challenges the family faced, however, Youmans' childhood tales are characterized by good natured resourcefulness as he and other family members confront the obstacles placed before them.

If Youmans' childhood in Kansas City, Kansas, was not always idyllic, it appears that it was, at least, always filled with memorable characters. One finds among Youmans' parents, school teachers, Boy Scout leaders, siblings, and friends an engaging cast of children and adults who help Youmans along his path toward becoming a well rounded and conscientious young man. His stories are gentle and lyrical, frequently amusing, and told with an eye for detail and phrasing that reveals an author of considerable ability.

Youmans' prose is as clear as his memory, and the result is a collection of homey vignettes that bring to mind a bygone, simpler time. Youmans' is a world where young boys take the Boy Scout oath to heart, where sex education emphasizes male honor, and the rewards of volunteerism trump the desire for more immediate gratifications. Although not explicitly stated, most of Youmans' stories carry an implied message about what it means to become a morally upright man. By today's standards, this, too, seems nostalgic. The contrasts between then and now are especially apparent when Youmans turns his attention to the opposite sex.

Describing his growing awareness of women with none of the titillation that saturates contemporary popular culture, Youmans' recollections of youthful encounters with women strike a welcome balance between candor and discretion.

Charming as these individual stories are, however, they are not held together by a central narrative that creates an engaging story overall. Even with a consistent moral underpinning, the stories remain doggedly episodic and fail to reach a satisfying conclusion. It needs to be pointed out as well that *The Road Taken* does not include anything of the events touted on the book's back cover. The stories end abruptly, with nary a word about how Youmans was the first white male to break the color barrier at a traditionally black fraternity. Were *The Road Taken* an introduction to Youmans' socially and politically challenging college years, that's a story many people would undoubtedly be eager to read.

A gentle and unassuming memoir, *The Road Taken* offers a glimpse into a time of childhood innocence and moral imperatives that seems alien to the contemporary sensibilities.

Diane Taylor