



The Spider's Web

Wayne Greenhaw

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Thomas Morgan Reed's physical problems were first brought to his family's attention by his Scoutmaster, who noticed that the boy had trouble with his back while swimming. Soon Thomas found himself in the hospital in a body cast that would be twisted to straighten out his spinal column, followed by several surgeries. The scoliosis, his parents were told, was caused by a slight case of polio at birth.

The entire procedure would last a year and Thomas would suffer great pain. He describes being partially awake during one surgery: "His fingers were buried in my blood and bones, working at my spine like the spider at her web, fastening, twisting, turning, pulling, his elbows bent out like wings, his fingers moving, weaving a strand of colorless pliable gristle, lowering and fastening, tying a knot, pulling upward again."

The author's own experience with polio in infancy and surgery to correct scoliosis of the spine at age fourteen enables the vividness of this work to seep directly from his youth in Alabama. Greenhaw has published fifteen books of fiction and non-fiction, and written hundreds of magazine articles.

Each of the stories in this collection paints a part of Thomas's life as the child of Depression-punished parents. His mother grew up in a wagon with her parents being pulled from town to town by two mules. She bettered herself and rose to levels of increasing responsibility, working at the community hospital. Thomas's father was raised on a farm in northern Alabama and was neither poor nor rich. He earned a living traveling, selling supplies to beauty shops and barbershops. As the traveling sales profession declined in the late '50s, so did Thomas's father, not unlike Willie Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

Besides the searing pain in the novella about Thomas's back, Greenhaw's other stories portray his protagonist facing the school bully, building a boat with his cousin and a black friend, nearly drowning and being saved by his cousin. Thomas's sexuality is awoken at age thirteen when a sexy neighbor and her husband move in next door. In another story he loses his virginity with an unkempt local girl and ends up being severely beaten by her brother. Thomas faces his father's mental illness and death; years later he also shares his mother's passing.

Each of the stories is a product of Thomas's (and Greenhaw's) coming of age in Alabama. Although the stories are at times out of chronological order, they come alive in a way that is real, often painful, and enduring in a style that is often as gut-wrenching as the writings of Pat Conroy.

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