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The Witness of Combines

Kent Meyers
University of Minnesota Press (September 1998)
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This is an unforgettable book. It is a memoir of dignity, beauty and life.

It begins with death.

Author Kent Meyers' father dies in the midst of raising a large family and building the family farm. His death is sudden and it means the end of the farm and the end of the family way of life.

But it is out of that death that Meyers' memoir comes to life. He takes us back in time through his memories of growing up on the farm. He has a vivid style that paints images and creates scenes that will make readers think they were one of Meyers' brothers or sisters playing in the hayloft or feeding cattle in frigid temperatures.

And there are moments when that same style can make readers feel the weariness when Meyers begins to plow a large field with a narrow plow: "Not only did the task of plowing that field once seem to stretch into eternityÃ'the thought of its impermanence was like lead in my heart. I was going to plow that entire field, and in a year I'd have to do it all again, and then again, and again."

It is through these details that Meyers plants the seeds of the bigger picture. For this is a memoir of a rural life that grows into a book about a philosophy of living. Readers are not led astray here. We learn what is going on at this farm and we see it is going on at every farm every day. Things die here; that is the essence of a farm. It is a continuing cycle of death and dying, of nurturing and eating, of raising and killing and of living and loving.

Even so, this is a memoir of example, not a philosophical diatribe. What do you do when a 30-acre cornfield has flooded and you are worried about planting? You haul the welder out of the tool shed, weld some 55-gallon drums together, attach a sheet of plywood to make a raft and set your children adrift into their imaginations.

The joys of childhood are mixed with the farm work. Children help kill chickens and try to sing louder than the engine roar of farm equipment. They participate in the dangers of farm work and they celebrate its innocent pleasures.

Meyers describes how canning was a necessary process that began in June and ended with the last harvest. This was no suburban grocery store harvest, rather a huge production involving hundreds of quarts of produce. Meyers' description of the process begins with its hazards and goes on to paint an image of the glistening jars filled with enticing fruits and vegetables neatly aligned on shelves in a dark basement. As the season lingers on, the full jars are replaced with the empty, less glistening, less promising.

Is this a matter-of-fact illustration of canning or a metaphor of life with its cycles of innocence and pleasure, of danger and fulfillment? The reader is left to decide. Whether you are from city or country, the memories here will entice you to read further and to understand more.

Reading a memoir is often like looking through a stranger's photo album. Sometimes you stumble across a picture you aren't sure if you were meant to see and that is the fun of it. In its intimacy, this memoir is unforgettable and in its telling it is superbly vivid and elegant.

JOE MIELKE (September / October 1998)

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