

Through Old Ground

Randy Cross

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(140pp)

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As much as the heartwarming memoir Through Old Ground is about its subject, it is also about those he loves and cares about most.

In a loud, clear, and often hilarious voice, Randy Cross brings the American South to life in the twenty-four short vignettes that make up his memoir, *Through Old Ground*.

Written as a series of anecdotes shared in chronological order, Cross's memoir tracks his life from childhood through his time with the National Guard, into academia and beyond. Each anecdote is spotted with old-fashioned wisdom and platitudes passed down from his kinsfolk. And while at times its rants against changing cultural norms and shifts in language are wearying, the book is more often flush with goodwill and a positive outlook.

Cross, a small-town Tennessee native born into a supportive but cantankerous family and raised to love language, traveled far and wide with the National Guard and as a Fulbright scholar. Family remained central to his life, and these stories hold a special place for his no-nonsense mother, who is seen haranguing a salesman about a faulty microwave and trailing Cross to the scene of a murder in Brazil. His father and brother make cameo appearances, too, while his wife, Kim, is preserved for actions like urging Cross to try skydiving and helping him to track down the grave of a famous author.

Cross, meanwhile, is vivified by his snide sense of humor, his love of teaching language, and his affection for his hometown. His is a story of a quiet life—one led without much adversity and filled with the privileges of support and success. He recalls its events with the flavor of a storyteller regaling listeners on a porch, reminiscing on his more adventurous past—and sometimes going on tangents when it comes to the perceived failures of the generations that followed his own.

Cross's opinions and mannerisms are declared without much introspection, though, somewhat flattening the text and limiting its appeal. Subjects including philosophy, society, and politics are treated with much the same light hand. Further, one chapter is less an anecdote than an essay; it rants against the use of polysyllabic words when terse language could cover the same ground and comments on Cross's struggles with gender-inclusive language. It's a surface-level discursion in an otherwise charming book of more memorable personal anecdotes.

Capturing formative moments, the memoir *Through Old Ground* delights in recalling warm and bizarre situations for the entertainment of others.

NICK GARDNER (December 19, 2023)

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