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True Crime

Touched by Fire: One Man's Road from Alabama to Dallas, 1954 to 1963
Frank Griffin
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“More and more it occurred to me that this strange coincidence between a father-and-son who’d never even known one another was the kind of story that makes history worth learning.” Frank Griffin, the narrator of *Touched by Fire*, and his father, Johnnie Frank Griffin, are linked by similar events that happened nearly ten years apart.

Johnnie Frank, reputed to be wild and profligate, left Griffin, his mother, and his sister when the boy was still a toddler. The fatherless child grew up dirt poor, a migrant cotton picker in rural Alabama in the vicinity of the crime-ridden, corrupt town of Phenix City. There, in 1954, the notorious local sheriff shot Attorney General-elect Albert Patterson, who had vowed to clean up the town. Johnnie Frank witnessed the sheriff and his victim entering an alleyway, then saw Patterson emerge, mortally wounded. He finally told authorities what he’d seen, and died soon after, under mysterious circumstances.

Patterson’s son, John, was grateful to Johnnie Frank, regarding him as redeemed, a hero. The son, meanwhile, ran off with the circus, hauled moonshine, joined the marines, and was fleeing a petty crime rap when he ended up in Dallas on the fateful day when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. He spotted Lee Harvey Oswald running away after shooting a cop. Troubled by these bizarre coincidences, Griffin contacted John Patterson, who had become governor of Alabama, believing they shared a strange destiny and feeling a need to understand the father he never knew.

The book has a carefully managed, journalistic sense of immediacy. The mysterious link between father and son, witnesses at separate famous crime scenes, is rich material for this readable saga. Written chronologically from Griffin's viewpoint, the story moves at a measured clip. A plethora of historical details may, at times, overburden the average reader. For example, there is a section where Griffin combs available documents, almost desperately it seems, for corroboration of his presence in Dallas.

The book's cover is an original, neatly organized collage in muted tones including photographs and newspaper headlines from the events described. Former Governor Patterson contributed a Foreword supporting Griffin's perception of their unusual bond ("our personal histories were linked at certain key points"). Very short positive comments from former President George H. W. Bush and singer George Jones may lend the book extra credibility and attract a general audience.

At heart, this is a personal story, though, and the reader is left with the impression that presenting his experience to the world is as important to Griffin as the specifics of the situations he recounts. If not significant American history in itself, the tale is certainly a gripping account of one man's connection to it, and how that kind of connection can change lives.

Barbara Bamberger Scott