ForeWord Reviews

CULTURE

Who Are You People? A Personal Journey into the Heart of Fanatical Passion in America
Shari Caudron
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She took a swing at golf and a stab at fencing, tried to dig gardening and flirted with photography. From belly dancing to Buddhism, the author desperately searched for something—anything—she could embrace with the kind of wanton abandon she so admired in others. Where they pursued Guinness Book world records, she'd bail out after two weeks. What did they have that she didn't?

Embarking upon a self-proclaimed "sojourn into the world of fanatical passion," Caudron devoted three years and covered more than 25,000 miles to infiltrate the outrageous world of special interest communities, from Barbie doll collectors to tornado chasers, "Mayberry" enthusiasts to pigeon racers.

An award-winning columnist whose debut collection of essays, *What Really Happened*, was a finalist in *ForeWord*'s "Book of the Year" awards, Caudron purposely immersed herself in activities that held no personal allure, doing so with a guileless aplomb that soon had her abandoning preconceived notions of such over-the-top enthusiasm. "Throughout this journey," she writes, "I've prided myself on the ability to boldly march into the hot molten center of any subculture, to go beneath crusty surface impressions and understand what and why, and how people love what they do. I've fancied myself to be a loving, open-minded combination of Mother Teresa, Henry Kissinger, and Mister Rogers. Part care. Part tact. Part cardigan."

Such subtle, self-deprecating candor infuses Caudron's fulsome and zesty narrative as she braves each encounter robustly armed with equal parts healthy skepticism and hearty enthusiasm. Signing up for Colorado's Three Lakes Ice Fishing Contest, Caudron wryly admits that "this is not the kind of thing someone like me, who thinks Percale sheets are too rough, wants to plunge into. So to speak." And yet, once the first fish tugs on the line, "suddenly I'm Hemingway, gritting my teeth, luring the monster beneath the deep with my steady, assured skill."

Yet there are times when Caudron tries too hard to discover what fans the flame of such unlikely passions when she can barely light her own hobby-challenged fire. Clearly, there are

fringe group devotees she can't warm up to, and though she deftly salvages insights from even the most unsavory confrontations, Caudron is at her best when her uproarious humor bursts forth in unbridled moments of incisive recognition, as when she found herself at a science fiction and fantasy convention. "It was as if everyone else had been invited to a masquerade, and I'd shown up eager to buy Tupperware."

What Caudron discovers is that there's a place for Tupperware junkies, too, and although she may not feel any more at home there than she did with the Trekkies, that's okay. By journey's end, Caudron realizes that a focused sense of self-acceptance can be just as enriching as a myopic passion any day.

Carol Haggas