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Safe Suicide (review)

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Safe Suicide

DEWITT HENRY

RED HEN PRESS, 2008. 200 PAGES, PAPER, \$23.00.

“Story is story,” said DeWitt Henry. We were speaking for the first time, in February, by telephone. His argument, elegantly but gently made, was for the considerable common ground between the processes of rendering one’s own history and of imagining the ride taken by one’s fictional characters on the currents with which one invests their lives.

Story may be story, but we are invited to explore a special terrain when an author chooses the form of a book-length memoir to tell his own story after more than four decades as a writer, mentor, and community builder among writers, as well as father and husband.

Henry’s *Safe Suicide* delivers powerfully on that invitation. A collection of interlocking essays-as-memoir written, and in most cases published, over a period of several years, the book provides a distinctive picture of the life of a humble yet venerable man of many talents as he struggled to use those talents well in his own writing; in his central role as founder, editor, and savior of *Ploughshares*; in his teaching; and in a rich personal life. For the past four decades, Henry has been a very important and positive force for independent publishing and for the building of community among writers in the Boston-Cambridge area.

Fourth Genre wisely asks its reviewers to adhere to the principle of “review the book, not the author,” and in what I have already written, I may have flirted with crossing that boundary; but I’ve done so in order to make what I think is an equally principled but perhaps more general claim on our attention. Now, more than ever, writers are pulled in many directions at once. Online publishing and marketing opportunities create many new paths and avenues

for writers to build community among themselves and participate in larger movements for change, but at the same time they are faced with the rampant American preoccupation with hierarchies of celebrity in every field of artistic endeavor. These confusing, centripetal, and potentially destructive forces are, I want to suggest, precisely the reasons that the life of a serious, lunch-pail author like Henry is especially deserving of our attention.

Henry tells his story in his own words—words taken from different times in his life and fashioned in the fits and starts of individually published segments that do not always segue smoothly from one to another, but that is small bother. I am a part of that Boston-area writing scene, which is why, inspired by this lovely book, I called Henry on the phone. I wanted to hear aloud the voice I heard in his book. The book had introduced me to a generous mentor and I wanted to talk to him. I was pretty sure he'd accept my call, and most graciously, he did. To employ a particularly Boston analogy, Henry has been the Larry Bird or Kevin Garnett of writers in this rich local literary community that I share with him: he's got game, but his ability to make teammates around him better may be remembered longer than his individual contributions.

Those of us who have imagined or tried to live a literary life often indulge ourselves by retracing the steps of those who may have outshone us, either at the trade, or at the life, or at both. Ernest Hemingway's Paris memoir, Norman Mailer's self-absorbed but astonishingly energetic rants, and certainly the more measured and enriching volumes on the writer's life by Eudora Welty, Francine Prose, and Annie Dillard may enchant us with the access they provide to worlds not otherwise accessible, but these authors have all achieved considerable success of a traditional kind, and sometimes we need to be reminded of the more workaday world in which most writers labor. For those who decide to risk the complete and active pursuit of the writer's life, without benefit of a trust fund, there is seldom a bungee cord—to borrow Henry's central metaphor—to protect us from failure and its consequences, including self-doubt and even, sometimes, self-destruction.

For serious young writers who would venture onto that terrain where a man or woman may attempt to balance a writing career and the serious and complicated everyday work of a well-lived life, there is more to gain from Henry's book than any Paris memoir, whatever the transient pleasures of the latter. Every page of this book beats with felt life. Henry's vivid portrayals of his wife and children and their well-loved family dog, as well as the

somewhat darker portraits of his parents and siblings and the secrets they kept to themselves and from each other, enrich our ultimate understanding of the delicate balance one must maintain between accepting the risks of going forth in the world as a writer and piecing together the patchwork of activities that help us keep the mortgage paid and the cupboard at least modestly filled.

Henry has created his memoir in the same way most of us live our lives—on the installment plan. It is assembled from a series of shorter contributions to literary journals. In doing it this way, Henry has perhaps unwittingly set himself a higher bar with respect to authenticity, for this is largely the story told as it happened, not as it was invented later on. Memoir created in a single after-the-fact writing campaign cannot, of course, be unconcerned with truth, but a preoccupation with legacy building may well invade it, leading the writer to be a little too careful, a little too eager to embellish. By writing it down as he worked his way through life, Henry required the same kind of consistency of himself that life lived in a family or a community tends to demand. That these vignettes of simple yet elegant prose so often come together with the resonance of a single narrative, a single life, strikes me as a small but worthy triumph for any collection, or for any life.

—Reviewed by Stephen Windwalker