PROJECT MUSE®

Man Killed by Pheasant and Other Kinships: A Memoir (review)

Michael Croley

Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction, Volume 11, Number 2, Fall 2009, pp. 167-170 (Review)

Published by Michigan State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/fge.0.0082>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/362774>

Man Killed by Pheasant and Other Kinships: A Memoir

JOHN PRICE

DA CAPO PRESS, 2008. 240 PAGES, CLOTH, \$25.00.

In fiction we say that stories are always about trouble. And usually, the more trouble the better. But is there any such dictum for nonfiction? As I read John Price's second book, *Man Killed by Pheasant*, a memoir told through loosely linked essays, I began to consider what the purpose of a memoir is and what it should reveal to us about its author. If a writer doesn't have a harrowing story to tell or isn't famous, then what are our expectations as readers? What is it that we're looking to glean from reading the story of ordinary, well-adjusted citizens with no great pain or loss in their lives?

Price's essays, arranged in a chronological order, detail a childhood and adolescence filled with an affinity for nature and comic-book heroes, and an adulthood in which he fell into the study of literature. There are not great moments of misery or catastrophe in his book, and for the most part, this is a welcome change of pace from the tell-every-dirty-secret craze that has infected the memoir industry over the last 20 years or so. But, on the other hand, the book lacks a singular narrative drive, and the fact that it consists of essays published at different times over a number of years sometimes makes it feel that much more discontinuous.

The book's primary source of tension is Price's resistant and slow-won love for his Iowa homeland—a place he longs to leave as a child, but never does. At times, in his struggle to come to grips with the ambivalence he feels toward his homeland, Price seems to reach for memories that don't serve as aptly as they might his purpose, which is to show how hard it was to accept his place, metaphorically and literally, in the world. In the essay "Nymph," for instance, Price recounts his days as an undergraduate at the University of

Iowa when he finds himself falling in love with literature and drifting away from his plan to study medicine. Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Illych" is what is pulling at him, and as he lies on his back in the park while reading it, his mind wanders and he discovers the discarded husks of cicada nymphs, which become emblematic of a life left behind. Of having begun to see the genius in Tolstoy's story, he writes, "Later, I would look back on this moment as perhaps the beginning of my journey as a writer. At the time, though, I had no idea what shape my life would assume or how far that life would carry me or what difference I could possibly make." Fair enough, but do any of us, at 20, know where a life will lead or how it will be measured?

He is often more successful. In the opening essay, "On Haskell Street," Price introduces us to his family history, telling the story of his great-grandparents who left Sweden to settle in the west-central Iowa town of Fort Dodge. He writes movingly and lovingly about his ancestors. At times he almost elevates them to mythical heroes before his own realities bring him back to earth: "I was in the middle of my own immigrant journey, it seemed. One morning I woke up in a foreign place: short, pimply, less than miraculous." He is lost in his own adolescence, but he is also losing the world he grew up in as the farm crisis of the early 1980s uproots his classmates and their families. In time, his own maternal grandparents will retire to Arizona. "The immigrant story continues," he writes. "I'm next to try to leave, applying to universities on the coasts, but ending up at the University of Iowa by default, on the other side of the state. I will fly farther someday, I swear."

But he doesn't. Events continue to keep him in-state. By his own admission, he stays on at the University of Iowa for graduate school because he has few other options. Then, he meets a girl who moves to Iowa during their courtship because he is still in graduate school. When she gets a teaching job in the state after he finishes grad school, he finds adjunct work and they settle in an Iowa town halfway between both their positions. Finally, they marry and settle in western Iowa when he is hired at the University of Nebraska–Omaha. They do make decisions along the way. They get married, for instance, despite a rocky trip west that makes them both question the engagement, but even that decision is one he just seems to fall into: "Looking back, I marvel that anyone gets married. I'm still not sure why we went through with it, why we didn't end it after the trip to Oregon."

If a memoir's purpose is to let us know a person's life, then Price is successful on this front. By the book's end, I do feel like I know Price and his wife, Stephanie, and the sons they are raising. The marriage has been a successful one after all. They love each other. They love nature. They love their children and their extended families. They even seem to have a healthy and respectful love for God, something not often viewed as hip in the world of literary memoir.

Price also comes to love Iowa and the people in it, though on some level he remains ambivalent to the end. Ambivalence may not drive a narrative the way trouble does, but Price can plumb its depths beautifully and connect it to the largest of communal concerns. Near the book's end, in an essay called "Why Geese Don't Winter in Paradise," Price connects his grandfather's memory loss and slide into dementia with the devastation wreaked on the Missouri River by the Army Corps of Engineers. "The Missouri has been declared one of the most endangered rivers in the nation, which is another way of saying it is in the act of forgetting itself. This amnesia—that we allow it to happen—is one of the reasons why I am sometimes ashamed to say I live here, why I'm still tempted to leave."

The aim of art, I believe, is to start with the self and push outward into the larger world. In some of the essays, Price does not seem to me to push outward like that, and these essays slowed the book down for me. I also think the unevenness among the pieces may have been foregrounded for me because the book is subtitled "a memoir." Such a subtitle engenders expectations of a seamless, retrospective tale that follows one strong current. Subtitles are often decided upon by publishers, or even marketing departments, and while I don't know if that was the case here, Price (and his readers) might have been better served if the book had been called a collection of essays, rather than a memoir.

But in many ways the book does hold together. Like Price's literary North Star, "The Death of Ivan Illych," a story told in two parts, the second half of Price's memoir carries the weight and emotional impact he seeks because of the work done by some of the book's slower opening essays. By the time we come to "Why Geese Don't Winter in Paradise" and "On Kalsow Prairie," we know enough of Price and his family that when he shares with us the intimacy of washing his stricken grandfather, we are moved by his loss: "When I removed his shirt, I noticed how the muscles in his left arm had vanished, how the cavities near his shoulders—the shoulders I'd once climbed—had

eroded, as deep as canyons. They seemed to measure how much we'd truly missed of each other, our bodies growing older." In passages like this, his personal desires extend beautifully out into the world and into the land he has grudgingly come to love.

—*Reviewed by Michael Croley*