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Zenith City: Stories from Duluth by Michael Fedo (review)

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Burning Fiery Furnace” and “River on Fire” deconstruct one of the city’s most ignominious images, the burning of the Cuyahoga River in the summer of 1967, by reminding the skeptical that like many Clevelanders “the river burned and was not consumed.”

Readers of these pages who bemoan the absence of a surgeon’s medical innovation from the Cleveland Clinic, a musician’s *encomium* from the Cleveland Orchestra, or a curator’s art critique from the Art Museum must remember that this anthology is less about notable achievements than about tales from the streets. Nonetheless, *Rust Belt Chic: The Cleveland Anthology* will be a great interest not only to native Clevelanders, like myself, but also to a wider audience of readers interested in urban anthropology and regional studies.

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Michael Fedo, *Zenith City: Stories from Duluth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

Having spent decades making sense of other people’s lives in our journalism, historical research, and literary criticism (or, like Michael Fedo’s cousin Jean, writing PR for New Yorkers), many of us, as we approach retirement, begin examining our own lives in print. Fair enough. But at age seventy, do we remember what we think we remember, or are we just telling ourselves—and others—stories? And what makes our own remembrances of “School Days,” “My Father and the Mobster,” “Baseball Days,” or “Christmas with the Klines” anything more than exercises in self-indulgence?

In the preface to this book, journalist-historian Fedo confronts the first question directly: “A writer’s memory is his bank. . . . Regardless of others’ perceptions and recollections, these remain his truth.” And further, “If [these things] had not happened, how could I be remembering them?” His point is well taken, although photos, letters, conversations with witnesses, old books, and articles can assist an aging memory. A firm foundation of facts is important. As my cheerleader granddaughter Megan likes to remind me, you need bases and fliers both, Grandpa.

The second question is more difficult to answer. To interest anyone be-

yond immediate family, our memoir must be either a story so remarkable as to be almost unimaginable—a page-turner which awestrikes and inspires even Y2K readers—or a tale of everyman in which the author’s story is his readers’ story because his moments are their moments of shared experience and history. A self-deprecating midwesterner, Fedo takes the second route. Sometimes he offers a personal slant on well known history, as in his stories of Joe DiMaggio’s first wife (Duluth’s Dorothy Arnold), and Bob Dylan’s Dinkytown days. These connections expand, of course, as a reader’s knowledge of history expands: I for one appreciate Fedo’s story of Cousin Jean’s fling, at age eighteen, with Fred Manfred because I knew Fred Manfred!

More often, Fedo works a psychological connection: Cousin Jean is the pattern of any woman trying to balance romance and career—or, one could argue, the archetype of a strong fifties women making her way successfully in the “male” world. Michael Fedo himself is every boy desperate to succeed in sports. All boys—all people—sometimes prank, so we read one of his stories and think “Typical adolescent male; sounds like that stunt I pulled back in ’59.” Again, those connections expand depending on the audience. Fedo’s tales of mobster relatives and rich spaghetti sauce will ring bells in the brain of any Italian, as will his story of seeking out relatives back in Italy. My mother, like his, shamed us into cleaning our plates with dire warnings of “starving Chinese children” (mine worried about starving Armenians). Other audiences may connect with things that missed me.

A prominent theme in this book is the frenzied world of Zenith City: public pontifications on one hand and modest realities on the other. Fedo repeatedly contrasts Duluth with New York City. Even Minnesota small town boosters like Sinclair Lewis’s George F. Babbitt exhibit a self-conscious inferiority in the face of what I have elsewhere called the unconscious urban arrogance of NYNY. Duluth is Midland yokel; New York is east coast sophistication. Like Garrison Keillor (Fedo published a Keillor biography in 1988), he sees folks here as mud-on-the-boots Great Plains plain: “We are what we are” is Lake Wobegon’s town motto. “I always got the impression we were expected to be average,” an old classmate tells Fedo in an essay titled “Thou Shalt Not Shine” (49). If Woody Allen wants to deprecate Duluth as the city that sleeps—well, yes it does. “Rang true for me,” Fedo writes. Minnesotans and, more broadly, midwesterners will understand this idea and connect with the stories that exemplify it.

The fact that most of these essays have been previously published sug-

gests that they ring a lot of bells with a lot of audiences. And Fedo shares many ideas with other writers. His oft-repeated argument that the environment we encounter in our youth leaves a permanent imprint finds corroboration in, for example, Annie Dillard's remark in *An American Childhood*: "When everything else has gone from my brain . . . what will be left, I believe, is typology." Bart Sutter makes a similar argument in his book on Duluth, *Cold Comfort*; so does Bill Holm in an essay on southwest Minnesota titled "Horizontal Grandeur."

I did occasionally question Fedo's reliability, wondering if I could quote verbatim a conversation I heard when I was four or my mother's memories of Pastor Marvin Samuelson's recollections of an encounter with Sinclair Lewis. While reliability is a problem with any sources, oral or print, immediate or distant, this book comes without footnotes or works cited.

The larger problem is that *Zenith City*, being a compilation of short sketches, lacks a coherent, nuanced assessment of the self or the city. It feels fragmented, like the woven radio monologues of Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon Days*. And buried everywhere in *Zenith City* are two paradoxes that demand examination: the Duluth elegance envisioned by town boosters and the Plains plainness of Duluth diners and dives; and the contradiction between the sometimes elegant language of Michael Fedo and the plainspeak of those diners and divers. *Zenith City* never really confronts, explores, or resolves those contradictions.

On the other hand, those tensions reveal a larger truth, and since these stories promote no discernible local or national agenda—while reflecting the proud modesty which is so very midwestern—*Zenith City* can be taken as accurate as well as entertaining.

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