

The Editor's Perspective

I don't much like memoirs. But a memoir reviewed later in this issue moves me to add my endorsement to the reviewer's. *Pack-in-house Daughter*, by Cheri Register, is enchanting, disturbing, and provocative. It should be read by a wide range of readers, including academics and other middle-class professionals who pride themselves on "siding with the working class." It shatters some of our illusions and our tendency to romanticize our identification with working-class people even as it encourages us to hold fast to our principles. The book should also be read by the countless working-class parents who worked hard to give their children the life they knew they could never have. Speaking for those children, this book says eloquently: we honor you, our parents, for your commitments and principles and will try to carry those into our very different worlds. As a bonus, the book's author tells her story so well, with a disarming openness about her conflicted emotions and with such humor and earthy but deep insight, that it will be accessible even to those who don't read much.

Register tells a story of growing up in the 1950s as the daughter of a longtime employee of the Wilson meatpacking plant in Albert Lea, Minnesota, not far from the more famous (and, in her account, more favored) Hormel plant in Austin and close enough to the Iowa border to be included on most Iowa maps. Coming-of-age memoirs now flood the market with stories that cater to our need for a revised Horatio Alger myth. In countless stories—many of them moving, important stories for our time—children grow up suffering from unspeakable poverty, abusive or otherwise dysfunctional families, or racism, but somehow survive and overcome those conditions to become not wealthy business moguls but their equivalent in our politically correct age: writers or academics who speak out against poverty, violence, and racism. Despite some similarities, this memoir is different. Register acknowledges gratefully that her parents provided an emotionally and economically secure environment for her, while educating her about her place in a world with more

complicated class divisions than we see in most popular memoirs. It is, in part, her more subtle account of those divisions that makes her story so compelling.

Make no mistake about it: this is a one-sided story. Register's father is a loyal union man, and she is loyal to the union line, too, especially in telling the story of a particularly divisive labor dispute in 1959. But even when she makes it clear where she believes justice and unfairness lie, she complicates the story in ways that enrich our understanding rather than feed our prejudices.

I grew up in rural Ohio only slightly later than Register, the son of a small-town midwestern merchant in a solidly middle-class family with undoubtedly less disposable income than Register's. My father, like many of Albert Lea's merchants, resented the unions that secured better wages for the workers in the nearby General Motors plant than he thought he could afford to pay his loyal, hard-working employees—some of whom earned more than he did. That experience has always made me suspicious of class-based analyses of rural and small-town life. But Register's subtle class analysis of life in mid-century Albert Lea rings true even to my suspicious ears.

It also rings true because Register does not rely on memory alone. She consulted contemporary sources and interviewed a wide range of informants—balancing her interview with the union president by her interview and sympathetic portrayal of the plant manager, for example. Register knows what memories—hers and her informants—are good for. They convey the sentiment of the times. In that sense her account is sentimental in the best sense of that word. Her language is so vivid and her memories so fine-tuned that we feel we are walking the streets of Albert Lea with her, encountering mid-century sights and sounds that conjure up our own memories. But she knows enough not to trust memories when they become nostalgic, and she walks that fine line with a fine sense of balance.

Register also manages to succeed where many memoirists try but fail: though cast as a memoir, this book feels like it is more about the times than it is about *her*. *Packinghouse Daughter* is an eloquent and fitting tribute to the working-class lives of The Greatest Generation.

—Marvin Bergman, editor

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