

Out Here: Essays and Encounters from the Heart, Soul and Left Field

Bob Hill

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Reaching past the surface of its subjects to excavate everyday wonders, Out Here is an appealing collection of local columns.

Newspaper columnist Bob Hill's astute essay collection *Out Here* covers topics including sports, death, and intriguing encounters with others.

The book begins with a narrative background on Hill, who was born in New Jersey and grew up in rural Illinois. He was passionate about sports and his community early on. After he graduated from college, though, he felt a lack of direction. He took a journalism class, nurtured his writing skills, and began writing as a career.

The columns collected here are embellished with occasional contextual information. Otherwise, their style is straightforward, interspersing journalistic observations with cynical wit, as with the declaration "Politicians exist to be lampooned." They meander through a variety of subjects, though all topics are approached in a thoughtful manner. One piece is devoted to Muhammad Ali's last fight; another is a study on plowing with mules; still another celebrates a local mailman who knows his whole town by heart.

Commentary on how journalism changed over the decades, becoming more corporate and distant from local coverage, winds in throughout. And a clear ethos emerges, with Hill praising hard work of all kinds and arguing that the country would be much improved if people put their all into their careers, personal lives, and communities. Also tying the disparate pieces together is a reigning focus on commonalities between, and the interdependence of, different people:

The town survived through thick and thin, living on its wits and its closeness. It was generally able to pull together when something was needed for its grade school or volunteer fire department. At other times, it drifted along with the human tides. The town neither prospered nor died; it just ran in place as the rest of the world sprinted off in new directions.

A column covering a commercial celebration of the nation's bicentennial also urges engaging with historical lessons, noting that national troubles are perennial and referencing events like Watergate to make its points.

The communities Hill covered are fleshed out via shrewd descriptions and evocative metaphors, as of a local woman learning to cultivate tomatoes in a practice akin to "the poetry of common language made uncommon." Elsewhere, a couple celebrating their eightieth anniversary is honored with a running joke of theirs about who is the optimist and who the pessimist. Here and elsewhere, Hill reaches past the surface of his subjects to excavate everyday wonders, making moments in time feel worthy of preservation.

A columnist's anthology, *Out Here* is full of insights on journalism, people, and writing.

M. W. MERRITT (December 17, 2024)

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