

Under the Great Elm: A Life of Luck & Wonder

Rich Flanders

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Evincing a carpe diem attitude, Under the Great Elm is a globe-trotting memoir.

Rich Flanders's memoir *Under the Great Elm* is about a life of adventure and love—as well as a healthy dose of luck.

Opening with his childhood and weaving toward the present, Flanders recounts his life stories with immersive lyricism. The book engages the senses in recalling cozy Parisian bookstores, kibbutz feasts, and a household garden. Visceral descriptions of less comfortable settings are also a draw, as with a traumatic childhood field trip and the persistent pain of grief.

Flanders's childhood is recalled in idyllic terms, complete with family photographs. He relays stories of summer nights among fireflies and ill-fated childhood business ventures; these tales ooze with Midwestern charm. Still, they are overabundant, especially since few are returned to or made to tie into the memoir's larger themes, muddling the significance of their inclusion. Reenacting dramatic deaths from Westerns with childhood friends exemplifies an exception: here are the roots of Flanders's enduring fascination with the American West, and his deep reverence for its Indigenous people (though the book's description of the "slanted eyes" of a Native American childhood crush sits at odds with this clear respect).

Luck is a frequent factor in these stories, though not always a source for good: Flanders enlisted in the military just ten days before the assassination of John F. Kennedy Jr., when "the world turned upside down." Fortunately, he was sent to Paris, though. He was also later accepted into a prestigious arts conservatory in New York City, where he found love with a fellow student, Anne (though circumstances conspired against them). He also performed on Broadway, dove into New Age practices and medicine, met and married a fellow student of the arts, and settled in the Hudson Valley. Later, tragedy struck, unmooring him.

Throughout the book, Flanders delights in everyday pleasures and embraces whatever circumstances he finds himself in. During his four years at a university in San Francisco, he indulges in summer trips into the rugged West, catching a week of work here and there to fund the next leg of his adventures. One such summer trek takes him all the way to Hawaii, whose stunning landscapes and easygoing vibe imprint on his heart, ensuring many return trips.

Flanders's prose is propulsive and surprising, featuring unexpected turns of phrase, like "I'd sold my blood to pay for the boat passage to Haifa." Powerful simplicity is preferred in the book's descriptions of moments of vulnerability—including around Flanders's loss of his first wife: "we were one. Now I was half." Later, a rekindled love is captured in terms of the tender ease of their unspoken understanding.

Still, the book wanders toward its end. It lingers too long with some personal interests, as with the search for extraterrestrials, to which a recommended resources section is devoted. The book's championing of a multilevel marketing company's products is also an uncomfortable tangent.

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