

View from the Crow's Nest

Susan L. Bradford

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Chasing the possibilities of youth leads to a coherent, wise adulthood in the travel-infused memoir View from the Crow's Nest.

Susan L. Bradford's memoir *View from the Crow's Nest* looks back on a 1960s midwestern youth and wrestles with perennial questions about who to become and what to do next.

Raised in Minneapolis, Bradford began searching for broader vistas following an eye-opening voyage to France after her high school graduation. A year of school in Switzerland also changed her feelings toward her hometown sweetheart. Her subsequent breakup, followed by the deaths of two friends because of a drunk driver, further emboldened her to take a less conventional path than her family expected: she enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley. She became an exuberant activist, participating in the antiwar movement and experimenting with drugs.

Narrated with affection and nostalgia, the book wrings forthright wisdom from its reflections on Bradford's past experiences. It evades self-judgment in favor of self-reassurance. There's a strong, comforting sense that, for all of the pain and early disorientation that the book recalls, these are still recollections of issues that were worked through.

The book's movements are sometimes topical rather than linear; some people in Bradford's life are revisited in separate chapters, with a few relationships remarked upon in terms of their longer-lasting effects. This attention extends to Bradford's father, who is remembered for the ways in which he offered her support. However, the development of the supporting cast is often brisk and short on depth. There are mentions, for example, of a mother's emotional coldness, but they're more made to support loose hypotheses on why certain decisions might have been reached than to give a full sense of her as a person.

The memoir's background is filled in with references to moments of historical significance, as with John F. Kennedy's assassination. A good sense of the counterculture is also established through Bradford's eager observations and experiences of the period: she recalls embracing the unknown and meeting strangers as well. Still, the book's reflections on such decisions are often peripheral. Bradford's excitement over hitchhiking across the world, for example, functions as a mere extension of her wide-eyed restlessness; dangers are subdued. Some poignant regrets are named, though, including over not having pursued a family life or children.

As Bradford matures, so does the text. She recalls travels to Hawaii, the South Pacific, and India; she mixes her (self-censored, but curiosity-expressing) letters to her parents into the book. There are instances of serendipity; other people prove willing to help her along the way. And, as Bradford bridges the gulf between her early attempts to remain lighthearted for her parents' sake and the actual truth about what she experienced, including heartbreak, the book moves toward a sympathetic ending.

The meandering memoir *View from the Crow's Nest* is filled with a youthful sense of longing; it covers inspiring travels across the world.

KAREN RIGBY (July 4, 2023)

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