

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Robert Bowie.** *A Roast for Coach Dan Spear: Small Town Football Dreams from the Florida Fifties.* Hamilton, Ohio: Ogee Zakamora Publications, 1998. 256 pp. \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9658258-7-0.

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## FLORIDA, FOOTBALL AND THE RUSSIANS

There is a humorous bumper sticker that one sees around Central Florida announcing proudly, "I Climbed Mount Dora." For those who know, the joke is that Mount Dora is a small town, not a mountain. Its elevation is somewhere in the thirty-foot range and therefore ten to twenty feet higher than much of the surrounding swath of coast-to-coast flatland between Tampa and the Kennedy Space Center.

Robert Bowie knows the place and the joke. When you finish this little gem-of-a-book you too will know Mount Dora, not as it is now, but as it was in the Fifties when Bobby Bowie was a skinny little scat-back on the Mount Dora High School football team. You will also know Robert Bowie, warts and all, as there is no pretense in this book, no slick veneer to protect either the guilty or the innocent.

The book is structured as a football game with pre-game, first quarter, second quarter, halftime, third quarter, fourth quarter and post-game. The game is a late-season showdown between a struggling Mount Dora squad and the undefeated papal powerhouse, Bishop Moore High School of Orlando. You have the classic elements of underdog v. big dog, small town v. city, and the Golden Hurricanes v. the Hornets. This was a match-up in a world where football was, and still is, a religious experience akin to what is usually associated with Texas, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.

Coach Dan Spear is the person who is being addressed throughout the narrative, and Bowie captures

the essence of the crusty small town football coach. The toughness, the simple approach to football through the trusted cliches, and the discipline demanded by Spear, are held up for our inspection. The degrees to which Bowie and his teammates are touched by this style, and choose to ignore this style, form an interesting sub-theme to the story.

The game itself is not the story. It is backdrop and vehicle. The story is the culture of Central Florida in the Fifties, the coming of age of Robert Bowie, and Bowie's reflections on Mount Dora and the world, past and present. Robert Bowie went on from Mount Dora High School to the University of Florida, then the army and graduate school. The result was a life as an academic at Miami University of Ohio. His subject turned out to be Russian Language and Literature, which grew out of his training at the Monterey Language Institute.

The Russian connection provides another vital element to the narrative with recollections of the Cold War, considerable commentary on contemporary Russian life, and a set of adventures in Russia and the former Soviet Union.

The heart of the story is Mount Dora in the Fifties. Not, as Bowie notes, the Fifties of "Happy Days," and not the Fifties of the urban mid-west or northeast. It is clearly Florida with all of its unique and irritating qualities, all its shortcomings, and all of its beauty and charm.

Bowie's reflections are given an edge by the fact that

he was always a bit of an outsider. He was born in New Jersey and his mother was a Catholic, making him suspect in the South on two counts. He was, nonetheless, a Florida cracker in many respects, or at least his father's son with a touch of South Carolina.

The classmates and neighbors of Robert Bowie are examined with both a sympathetic and critical eye, as Bowie presents both the bigotry of southern religion and the myopic vision imposed by endemic racism. He offers his own views on the same subjects and these comments will offend some and amuse others. They will never bore.

Robert Bowie has succeeded in recreating the atmosphere of Mount Dora—the main street, the high school, the racial division, the climate, the foliage, the social round of the small town, and high school football. He has captured the essence of small town football, its place in the life of the town and his own life. In addition we meet the great local characters such as “The Walking Jesus.” We smell the flowers and feel the heat.

In some ways the most memorable moment comes in the account of the death of Bowie's sister who is swept away by cancer. Bowie's pain remains palpable across the years, and the trauma for the young boy remains vivid for writer and reader alike.

The book is written in a style that is generally engaging and at times riveting, while only occasionally irritating. Bowie has a tendency to recite lists of names of people from his youth, classmates and teachers. Unlike Walt Whitman's expansive and energizing lists, the technique does not work for Bowie, serving rather as an annoyance and distraction from an otherwise pleasant read.

For those interested in Central Florida this is a wonderful remembrance of the place as it once was the world of Florida before the Capitalist Rodent. For those who grew up in the Fifties many of Bowie's experiences will resonate with more than nostalgia. For those of us who study or work in sport this book captures the spirit and the detail of the big game and the general football culture from the inside out.

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