



The Way-Back Room: A Memoir of a Detroit Childhood (Working Lives Series)

Mary Minock

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Don't let the title fool you. Mary Minock's new book certainly evokes 1950's Detroit. Her father works for Cadillac, smells of "cigarettes and steel," and dies young of a brain tumor. The old neighborhood on Clark Street is working class, first and second generation immigrant families, transplanted Southern folk, all mostly white, mostly Catholic, but starting to lean more and more Protestant. Teenage Mary walks across the Ambassador Bridge to Windsor, as if that Canadian town were a suburb of Detroit. This book may derive its jibe from post-World War II Motown, but Minock's story is foremost an American memoir. After her father dies, her mother trains to be an Avon Lady. Like millions of kids, Mary idolizes Davy Crockett (her father's originally from Tennessee, too), and later, Mary must choose between heartthrobs: Pat Boone or Elvis. She longs for the Memphis King, and at the heart of this memoir is a 1950's girl's sexual and intellectual awakening, the struggle against the guilt of a Catholic upbringing, but it's also the generational guilt that defined an era. I'm not Catholic, I'm not a woman, and I grew up in small, rural town. But I connected deeply to this story, and isn't that the measure of a good memoir? Minock has written her story, and ours: the story of those men and women (especially women) who grew up back then, and a story for younger readers who always wanted the secret history that their own mothers and fathers would never share. ~Martin Lammon, editor of Arts and Letters

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