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Truth Be Told: A Review of *The Legend of Shane the Piper: A Novel Memoir*

Rick Spier. *The Legend of Shane the Piper: A Novel Memoir*. Moon Donkey Press, 2012.

Rick Spier describes his new book, *The Legend of Shane the Piper*, as a blend of autobiography and fiction, though it is not always clear what is factual and what is fictional. Spier states that details about his family are true, but “creative license has been taken in the narrative” for “the sake of storytelling.”

On its surface, Spier’s novel memoir tells his story of recovery from alcoholism. Spier tells this old, predictable story, evoking the misery of self-loathing that alcoholism at once induces and masks. Spier traces his alcoholism back to the cruelty of his step-father and to his mother’s collusion in the brutality. Spier’s step-father demands that the boy succeed athletically and measure up in all sorts of inchoate, perhaps incoherent and unnamable, ways. Spier finds himself defenseless against those demands.

In telling his story, Spier also recalls undergraduate life in the early 1970s. At Dartmouth, Spier found an administration that seemed to have encouraged alcohol not just as a social lubricant for new students but also as the bonding agent for the relationships it hoped would develop between students. It was, for him, a grim reinforcement of his alcoholism.

Spier also summons up the cultural dislocation of a Southerner at a northern college just before the South became prosperous in the 1970s. When he asks for iced tea at a diner shortly after arriving at Hanover and is told it is out of season, he realizes he is in a different country: “For the first time in my life, then, I became self-aware of my Southern-ness as being a differentness toward which other people might harbor prejudice or exercise bias.”

Spier’s sense of differentness exacerbates the adolescent torment already in full flight before he goes off to college. Though he tends to overwrite at times, Spier is very good at drawing that angst in a telling detail or offhand comment. Talking about his insecurity and self-consciousness, he remembers, “I couldn’t walk past a mirror or window or anything else that showed my reflection without taking a gander out of fear that I might have a hair out of place.”

The unexamined story of this book is the profound homoerotic attraction that Spier feels for Shane Little-Deer O’Loughlin. His

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attraction to Shane is immediate and intense, extending even to the physical: “As stunning and exotic as he’d been in his clothes, to see him out of them was a quantum leap beyond! . . . As for his little fatinki, well, it wasn’t so much that it was big (and it was big), even with the shrinkage induced by the cold air and water as that it so precisely fit his body, and everything else about him, for that matter. Indeed, he was perfect . . .” Initially Spier idolizes O’Loughlin, imagining him to be the success that would make his parents love him, but he learns Shane is something of an imposter. He is not the typical Dartmouth student, but a Vietnam vet, a Medal of Honor winner, and a man mortally sick with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. Spier comes to understand that O’Loughlin has his own internal saboteurs that, with his illness, drive him to suicide. The story of his relationship with O’Loughlin bears reflection and might make this novel memoir into a more substantive work, one whose narrative would move beyond Spier’s self-loathing and transfigure the wretchedness of the world.