

Storyteller Dvorak brings it with 'Bowling for Christmas'



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REVIEWS

BY PAUL SCHINGLE
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Have you ever met someone who can tell a story, and it drifts into another one and (maybe) still another one? After all is said and done, you're back to hearing about the first thing? And, when you meet this guy or gal, do you find yourself hanging on every word? Don't you hate people like that? And don't you love 'em?

One of my favorite writers of non-fiction is a guy named Edward Abbey. He wrote (he left us some twenty-five years ago) about the southwest - the deserts, the canyons, the free-spirited people. I always found myself hanging on every word. The West is my home and, when I get to missing the terrain, I pull out my copy of "Desert Solitaire."

Now, to compare Mark Dvorak to Edward Abbey wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't be fair to Edward. Nor would it be to Mark. One thing their styles have in common is that ability to be a great storyteller in writing. This is not an easy task.

Mark Dvorak is a singer, songwriter, teacher, accomplished musician (both live and recording), raconteur and yes, writer (God, I hate him).

Mark's latest book, "Bowling for Christmas and Other Tales from the Road" is a collection of non-fiction and poetry. There are twenty-four pieces in total. Three of them are poetry. The others are short non-fiction essays. He covers topics as varied as travel itself, specific travels to Finland, West Virginia, Nebraska, and others, specific performances and famous personages met (whether dead or alive). What strings the pieces together is the way the stories are told. Reading these pieces, you feel almost exactly the same as if you were sitting with Mark around a campfire, and he says, "... there was this time..." and you just keep on the edge of your rock.

There is a method to his madness, though. Four of the stories, in the first third or so of the book, ("Weary Prodigal Come," "Yesterday I Was Baptized," "Can You Tell Me Which Way is North?" and "Coffee All Day") deal with a whirlwind tour of Finland. He was performing with three fellow Chicago musicians. Now the themes of the stories are unrelated (arriving in Finland, taking a sauna, etc.), but they're bunched together, so the reader has some kind of thread.

Other stories are spread out in different ways. Mark tells us of "The Last Time I Saw John

Hartford," in which he actually got to jam with the legend. "Chasing the Great Lead Belly" speaks of Mark's long road to the grave of the blues/folk/12-string icon. "I Can Be Bought, but I Can't Be Sold" is about an interview Mark had with the amazing singer songwriter Brownie McGhee.

As an example of the kind of weaving Mark can do, I'll use the Brownie McGhee piece. It starts with Mark speaking of attending a conference and others telling him of their version of "the elevator pitch." Then he stealthily tells us of his one on one encounter with the blues legend. The technique is beautiful without seeming contrived. We get a personal story (I met this guy) with a universal theme (if you listen to someone with experience, you may learn something).

I could go on and on about each of the stories here, but I won't. If you like a good story, read this book. I say that without prejudice. Read this book.

I will speak about one of the stories that particularly struck me. It's the title story, "Bowling for Christmas."

I alluded to Edward Abbey before. One thing Abbey did to me with his last novel (yes, he wrote fiction, too), "A Fool's Progress," was to make me laugh and cry. Literally. People say that about movies, "it made me laugh and it made me cry." "A Fool's Progress" literally made me do that - in the same paragraph. No other writer has ever done that before, or since. Until now.

Perhaps I'm a softie. "Bowling for Christmas" deals with an encounter Mark had performing for a group of adults with special needs. I've been working with such people my entire adult life, so no doubt I'm biased. I won't go into the details but this piece made me laugh and cry at the same time. This guy can bring it.

Mark's prose is poetic - his poetry prosaic. Every piece reads quickly. I can't wait to read it again.

Yes, Mark Dvorak is an accomplished singer, songwriter, musician, teacher, storyteller, folklorist and, of course writer (God, I hate him). In addition, Mark Dvorak is a great human being. It shows in his writing (God, I love him).

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