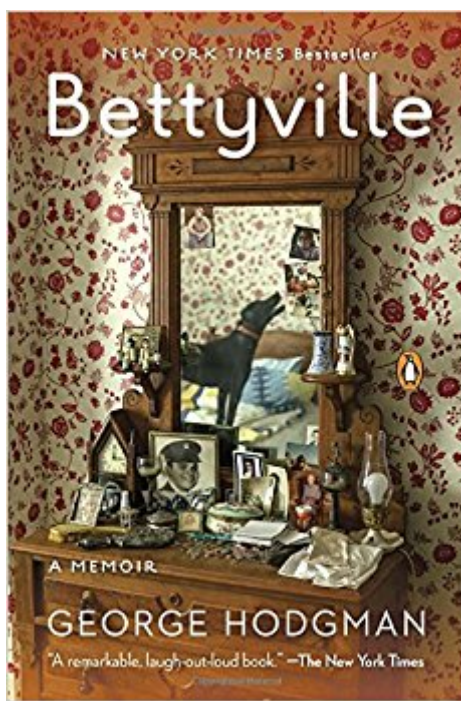


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Bettyville: A Memoir



Synopsis

“The idea of a cultured gay man leaving New York City to care for his aging mother in Paris, Missouri, is already funny, and George Hodgman reaps that humor with great charm. But then he plunges deep, examining the warm yet fraught relationship between mother and son with profound insight and understanding.” —Alison Bechdel, author of *Fun Home* **NEW YORK TIMES** BESTSELLER FINALIST FOR THE NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD When George Hodgman leaves Manhattan for his hometown of Paris, Missouri, he finds himself “an unlikely caretaker and near-lethal cook” in a head-on collision with his aging mother, Betty, a woman of wit and will. Will George lure her into assisted living? When hell freezes over. He can’t bring himself to force her from the home both treasure — the place where his father’s voice lingers, the scene of shared jokes, skirmishes, and, behind the dusty antiques, a rarely acknowledged conflict: Betty, who speaks her mind but cannot quite reveal her heart, has never really accepted the fact that her son is gay. As these two unforgettable characters try to bring their different worlds together, Hodgman reveals the challenges of Betty’s life and his own struggle for self-respect, moving readers from their small town — crumbling but still colorful — to the star-studded corridors of Vanity Fair. Evocative of *The End of Your Life Book Club* and *The Tender Bar*, Hodgman’s *New York Times* bestselling debut is both an indelible portrait of a family and an exquisitely told tale of a prodigal son’s return. “A remarkable, laugh-out-loud book . . . Rarely has the subject of elder care produced such droll human comedy, or a heroine quite on the mettlesome order of Betty Baker Hodgman. For as much as the book works on several levels (as a meditation on belonging, as a story of growing up gay and the psychic cost of silence, as metaphor for recovery), it is the strong-willed Betty who shines through.” —The New York Times

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Customer Reviews

In this loving and lovely memoir, the author returns home to Paris Missouri to care for his 90 year old mother. Never an easy-going person, she is now struggling with loss of memory, health problems, and the deep frustrations of losing her ability to lead the social life that was so important to her. She's a stubborn person, and so is he. There's an honesty to the frustration he feels in trying to get her to do what needs to be done. The book is more than a simple account of the last year or so of his mother's life. The author moves between his childhood in the 60's and 70's in this small town, where he always felt he was an outsider, and explores the role his homosexuality played in his relationship with his family. Coming from an old-school family, denial of unpleasant truths dominated, and being roughly the same age as the author, I recognize many patterns. He has a deep love for his family, and yet wonders how come he found it so hard to be close to others. He mourns the loss of community in his hometown, while recounting how he felt the pain of being different there. This is a kind and honest seeming memoir. He touches on his homosexuality, and come of age as the AIDs epidemic hit, and his drug addiction, but these are not lurid. They represent real experiences, but are connected to his issues of pushing people away. I really enjoyed this book, and felt the full force of his mother's personality, as well his stumbling his way towards knowing himself better. There's no brilliant moment of happy ending, just a sense of having tried to do the right thing, a sense of accommodations between two people, and some understanding. The writing is also lovely, at times almost lyrical.

I'm a hard sell. When someone tells me a book is funny, I invariably wind up wondering why s/he found it funny -- because I definitely did not. I tend to ignore most reviews of books (or movies), preferring to decide for myself on the merits, or lack of them in a given piece of work. That said, I chose to review *Bettyville* because I was actually intrigued by the cover--the very reason we've always been told not to judge a book. But the photograph had an authentic feel to it that rang a small bell for me. So I got the book. And I truly loved it. I loved George Hodgman and his mother; his father, too. Hodgman's great gift is to present the connective tissue between reader and writer, the thoughts and feelings and events that knit us together in a manner achieved only by the most profoundly truthful and deeply felt telling of lives lived. In spite of our obvious differences

(male/female, straight/gay, etc) Hodgman's feelings mirror my own in too many ways to enumerate. He made me laugh repeatedly; he moved me often. I felt his irritation, his anger with himself, and his good-hearted impulses toward others. I knew him because he reveals himself so completely, so courageously, so hilariously. For example: "Just a typical American family, torn between love and homicide, but united in our own way." One just has to laugh at something so absolutely true. This book deserves recognition and accolades. Read it and feel your heart open and then constrict, then open again. The parent in me wants to adopt the little boy in George. The child in me wants to be friends with that lonely boy whose isolation feels remembered to me. And the sister in me wants to help George prepare some treats for Betty, and then persuade her to put on her comfy old wrecked sandals so that we can all go out for a nice, easy walk.

This memoir looks at coming home, dealing with an elder parent who should probably be packed off to assisted living, and a kinder and gentler lifestyle where people are accepted for who they are even when that 'who' is not necessarily understood. As a native of the Midwest there was a lot in this book that resonated with me. I grew up in urban suburban sprawl, but spent a lot of time in the gentler places so this was something I had experienced a little. In the beginning the author discusses the names of places in Missouri. His family home was in Paris, MO. I got a huge kick out of that because I'm not sure any state rivals Missouri in the name game. California, Mexico.....all real places and we are not talking states here. However, the real heart and soul of this book is Hodgman's sometimes cantankerous mother who loves him dearly but can't quite accept or understand the fact that he is gay. Hodgman and his mother share a lot of things including their love of the family home and Paris. This book travels back and forth in time. It deals with the current concern for an aging parent and goes back to the old days where community as well as family counted and going to church was a major deal. Hodgman has worked for Vanity Fair in New York among other prominent publications. He's enjoyed being in the epicenter of urban sophistication, but he also clings to the past and appreciates the easier ways of the Midwest and writes lyrically about it. He is a marvelous writer with a wry sense of humor but also an emotional honesty that hones in on family and tradition and his sincere love and unabashed affection for both. This was such an enjoyable book that I was sorry when it ended.

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