

BORN AGAIN SKEPTIC & OTHER VALEDICTIONS

by Robert Murray Davis

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A review by Kate Kimball

Like the *Odyssey*, Robert Murray Davis's *Born Again Skeptic & Other Valedictions* takes the reader on an epic journey but, in this case, through the sphere of academia, sharing, in episodic fashion, Davis's process of becoming "born-again"—intellectually. This collection of essays aptly focuses on the narrative of aging, and perhaps even Odysseus would agree that old age is *not* for sissies. But then, Davis may implore me take a closer look at what I consider *old* and how I define *sissy*. Indeed, Davis's essays focus on the beauty that comes with the journey of leaving home young and returning older, more mature, more skeptical, and reborn. The narrative of aging is aptly shown as a fight that breeds strength, insight, courage, and skill. Davis delivers his story in a sophisticated yet minimalistic style that leaves a reader asking almost impossible questions of herself.

Davis begins the collection by questioning the form of autobiography itself and then reminds us of the fictional elements of writing about truth. In fact, Odysseus returned from Ithaca after ten years of battle at Troy and was questioned by his wife if he had any excuse for leaving again. Davis explains that Odysseus replied that he had one final journey. Davis writes, "Now that I am what the AARP calls 'mature,' I suspect that Odysseus might look sternly at anyone who looks as if he is about to ask a question, tell him to shut the hell up, and go on with his travels. But perhaps that's because I haven't adjusted well enough to civilian life" (7). But, what is "civilian" life? And what does it have to do with age? Those are the

questions Davis aims to answer in his two-hundred sixty-three page collection of essays, and, as it turns out, academia is an inherent part of that answer.

In the first section, “Roots,” Davis discusses his upbringing in Oklahoma. There was a simple farmhouse, a family who came together over food, and a set of values and beliefs that were staunchly unchangeable. Davis describes his father as a man who did not want to get a dishwasher because he didn’t want to get married again. His mother is described as a “supremely confident driver” (16) and a caffeine-addict. Yet Davis continues to push the characters of his family beyond the familiar Oklahoman caricatures that may be familiar to many readers. He does this by questioning these figures and becoming more and more skeptical of what they represent about his background. Davis asks, “But what was Mom like—then or ever—not as my mother but as an independent individual?” (15). And is it possible for anyone to know his or her parents later in life *as* individuals? It is difficult to find that human connection later, and Davis admits that, “Beyond simple arithmetic lay the realm of emotional calculus, where trajectories and end-points have no numbers” (15). At the end, all that we are left with is dates and numbers in family records.

The second section, “Routes,” investigates Davis’s various pathways out of Oklahoma. Like Odysseus, Davis takes many of these pathways with a curious appetite and some excitement. These particular essays describe the Southwest—Oklahoma and Arizona primarily—and aim to explore their unique vernacular and simplistic way of life. There is also the meditation on travel itself. Davis focuses on his drive across the United States to Canada, the quaint endearment of small towns, the disconnection with places that aren’t home.

“Recoveries” examines various fall-outs from the routes that Davis has taken. Some of these fall-outs are literal, and others deal with deepening intellectual and spiritual divides. Davis explores his family’s “built-in schism”—his grandmother being a devout

German-American Catholic and his father being a Protestant but much less devout (92). There is the fall-out Davis has with religion, yet the way he still questions and explores themes of faith. One of the strongest essays deals with another addiction—bibliomania—and describes the process of downsizing a book collection after a difficult divorce. There is also drinking—a typical Oklahoman issue, Davis quips. After becoming sober, Davis writes, “My unconscious mind doesn’t seem to be involved. For years after I quit smoking, I had dreams about lighting up. But there’ve been no dreams and no waking temptations that involve drinking” (109).

In “Discoveries,” Davis investigates pieces of his own intellectual awakening, which was largely influenced by an in-depth study of Evelyn Waugh. Davis says, “Chasing Waugh down nights and days, his visions and revisions in thousands of lines of manuscript and variant additions, had some interesting consequences” (158). This further perpetuated Davis’s interest in the craft of writing, which in turn influenced the development of his thinking. His discovery of writing echoes Odysseus’s discovery of the Cyclops and reminds the reader of the growth and maturity that comes with finding a subject that one is both enamored by and deeply afraid to study.

Lastly, “Valedictions” presents a “re-birth,” as Davis leaves the reader with his journey to becoming a “twentieth-century man” (245). Davis mentions that he never identified himself in this way until he entered a Ph.D. program at the University of Wisconsin. The doctoral program provides an “awakening” for Davis and seems to help him to both embrace his Oklahoman roots and use them to his advantage as a seasoned intellectual. *Born Again Skeptic* is a strong illustration of the power of a college education and the opportunities it can bring for anyone, no matter where he or she is from. In short, Davis creates a vibrant journey for academics and non-academics alike.