

A CHILD OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY

Eugene Wildman

**SWEET DREAMS:
A FAMILY HISTORY**
De Witt Henry
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sustains their comfortable existence. Of course there are deeper, sweeter dreams too, and some that turn out not so sweet. The memoir in a way is like a slow amble through the post-World War II landscape. In any number of ways Henry—Dee to friends and intimates—is a child of the American century, the product of a less complicated, more optimistic time and a country that can hardly be found anymore—if it ever truly did exist outside of popular myth. Born in the months before Pearl Harbor, Henry grew to manhood in the towns and suburbs outside Philadelphia in the 1940s and 50s. College followed (Amherst), and in the early 60s grad school (Harvard), a bit too soon for Vietnam and the culture wars that would shortly roil the country. The attitudes and values he brought from home—about race, class, religion—were predictably narrow and conservative.

In a way, *Sweet Dreams* is a book not only of memories but about memory itself and the role it plays in shaping who we are. Despite the painstaking reconstructions, and the book brims with detail, there are places where memory fails, and there are gaps. The story thus resembles an album of snapshots or home movies. And then abruptly, an image will be missing, or the screen will go blank, and Henry will be left to wonder. Early on, for example, he tells us, “I have no direct memory of my father before I am

Sweet Dreams is a richly detailed memoir that delivers on the straightforward promise of the title, along with its implied ironies. The author has subtitled it *A Family History*, and while there is abundant material about De Witt Henry’s parents and siblings and other close relations, it is in essence the story of his life: his coming of age and sometimes floundering attempts to find his way in the world. But do not be misled by the personal nature of the account; both the narrative arc and the plainspoken manner of telling allow the reader easy access to the material. With a few adjustments here or there, *Sweet Dreams* could well be your story too, and mine.

The title alludes to the treats that come from the candy factory that is the family business and



Detail from cover

eight... [M]y memories...from when I am five, or even earlier, are rich. I search for him, for where he must have been...but nothing is there.”

These gaps and absences are affecting. It is one of the more interesting features of the book, and it shows up in a few ways. The world the Henrys moved in was overwhelmingly white and middle class, one in which African Americans, Jews, and other minorities had minimal presence and were only marginally accepted. Yet for years the family had a live-in “colored” maid with whom Henry was

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close. Only years later does he come to understand that he knew almost nothing about her real life and circumstances. He writes of a time when she no longer boards with them and stays at her sister's: "I had little sense...of the world, apart from and foreign to ours, where she would come from and return... that she was not loved or appreciated there...." And then he adds, "She is in none of our family pictures, movies or stills."

One of Henry's high school classmates, a gifted African American student, gets a neighborhood girl pregnant and does the right thing, setting a lethal chain of events in motion. Several years later, Henry's father sends him a clipping from the local paper. His once-promising schoolmate had walked into the local dry cleaner's and shot the clerk to death. Drugs were apparently involved. Henry notes, "I try, but I can't imagine him. Not Rudy. Not murder. Not prison."

Perhaps the most persistent dream, nursed from childhood, is to become a writer, and after a year of grad school, Henry takes a leave to try his luck at the Iowa writing program. There he is mentored by Richard Yates, author of the novel *Revolutionary Road* (1961), who is impressed with his work. Unfortunately, at the year's end Yates leaves for Hollywood to work on a film. His place is taken by Nelson Algren, a very different writer with a different aesthetic, who is far less encouraging. Disheartened, though still clinging to his dream, he returns to Harvard to complete his degree. His goals at this stage have a pragmatic edge: obtain a secure faculty

position, establish himself as a writer, and settle down with the right woman. As far as the latter goes, he has had a number of affairs and dalliances, but nothing fulfilling or lasting.

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Henry's recall as he reviews his life seems almost random, indiscriminate. He will write about even the most inconsequential things: a visit to the barber's, shopping with his mother. The tiniest details will catch his eye; it is all bright and shiny, bursting with motion and color. "Our bathroom was yellow; Dad's was blue, Mom's pink. Judy left hairpins all over, and had a habit, too, of cutting her hair over the toilet, so there would be strands and snips of hair everywhere. She took bubble baths. Once she left her diary on a shelf by the tub and I looked through it..."

There is a logic governing these descriptions. As Henry acquires experience of the world and as we move closer to the present, shadows appear; the glittery surface starts to peel and fall away. The father, we learn early on, has been having an affair and is a raging alcoholic; the mother, for her part, has had a nervous breakdown.

By far the most important relationship in Henry's life has been with her. As the narrative

approaches its close, he is married, to a Jewish woman no less, an eventuality that would once have been unthinkable. As he puts it, "my gosh, but times are changing." But the marriage, though solid, is not entirely fulfilling, now *she* is gone. And then this breathtaking bit of introspection: "[M]y true love indeed was my mother, my dream to love her romantically...spirit to spirit, across the years...." As if he had not been clear enough, Henry adds, "All other women fail to satisfy...if only Mom were my age, were young...." Yet she has died and he is somehow freed; emotionally and consciously, he chooses the woman he has shared his bed with. His marriage comes alive again. "I felt this as a transfer from Mom, from mother, to wife."

Henry is perhaps best known as the co-founder and editor of the distinguished literary magazine *Ploughshares*, and as a professor and head of the creative writing program at Emerson College. The novel begun at Iowa and struggled over for many years—*The Marriage of Anna May Potts* (2001)—has finally seen the light of day. There is also a book of essays, *Safe Suicide* (2008), and numerous anthologies he has edited. How sweet when dreams come true at last.

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A VIEW FROM THE CURB

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