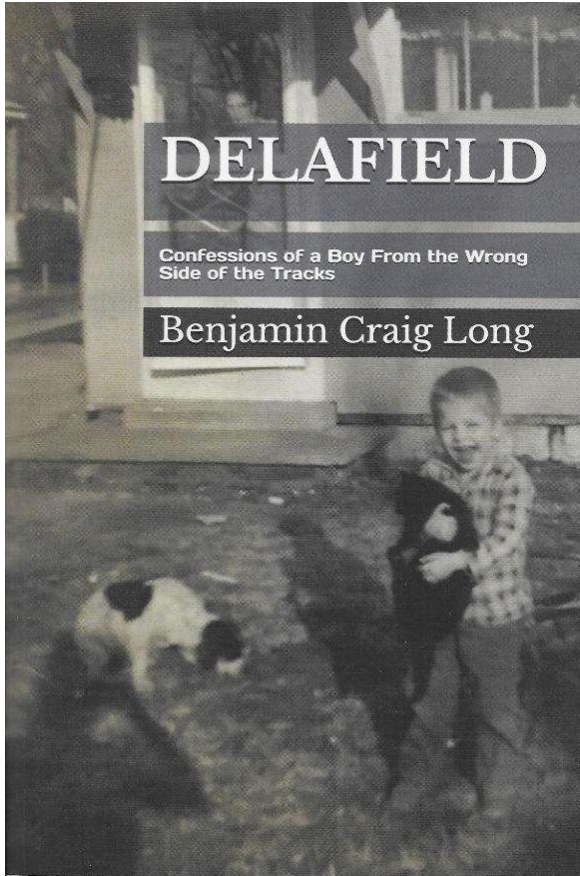


Growing up in Delafield inspires book

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“Delafield: Confessions of a Boy from the Wrong Side of the Tracks” by Benjamin Craig Long. Bowling Green: Benjamin Craig Long, 2020. 491 pages, \$17.95 (paperback).



“The main character in this book is a skinny, dark-haired, teenage bookworm who’s yet to establish an identity,” Benjamin Craig Long explains near the beginning of “Delafield: Confessions of a Boy from the Wrong Side of the Tracks,” his autobiographical chronicle of what it was like growing up in one of the more economically-challenged communities in southcentral Kentucky. “Like most teenagers, he wants desperately to fit in – to be respected and liked, but he has no idea what to do to make that happen. Could it be he didn’t start in the right place? More than anything else, he’s a product of his environment – a strange, peculiar environment that varied over time.

“Delafield is the name given a community located in the northcentral section of Bowling Green on the banks of the Barren River,” Long continues. “The history of this community, being justification for the basis of its reputation, was established long before my birth. My family on my mother’s side were Delafield natives. That fact, and my subsequent upbringing there, gives me the authority to write about it.”

So begins one of the most enlightening (and entertaining) forays into local history and culture I have had occasion to peruse in quite some time. Indeed, following Long as he experiences life through his unique lens proved to be one of the more exciting and endearing literary journeys I’ve ever taken. Then again, that reaction probably has something to do with our generational proximity and the fact that I could instantly relate to the world he was bringing to life on each page. One thing is very clear: Long is a natural and immensely talented storyteller.

“Delafield” consists of a preface, 31 relatively concise yet extraordinarily mesmerizing chapters and an epilogue, “30 Years Later,” that serves as a capstone for the adventure the reader has just finished. The narrative is captivating and conversational, and each episode Long describes seems to come alive as his exquisite prose animates the movie generated in your head. Like many readers, I grew up in a community that was eerily analogous to the one that serves as the backdrop for this coming-of-age story. The accuracy and truth that virtually drips off every page is astounding. Much of the world a lot of us grew up in is gone, but the influences of our collective upbringing remain to the present day.

A lot of the book revolves around Long’s work selling corndogs at Beech Bend. And while at first reflection that may sound trite and rather boring, in reality nothing could be farther from the truth. The experience gave Long a front-row seat to learn a lot about life, relationships, economics, ethics,

politics, careers and people in general. He obviously took full advantage of the opportunity to educate himself and build a realistic and grounded foundation that has served him well through the years.

“Most of the time, the talks between the campers and myself were just friendly banter and cliché conversations,” he muses in “Dress Code,” the 14th chapter. “Occasionally individual patrons stood out due to their personable wholesomeness. We always found common ground. It seems almost every person is glad to share the virtues of their hometown. A Delafield kid like me, well – I figured that was educational. In my case, except for one trip to New Jersey when I was 5 years old, I’d never been anywhere. It was easy for me to romanticize the places they described.”

“The longer I was exposed to the different varieties of folks, the more natural it was to make conversation with them,” he goes on a little later. “Most people mean well – even the rude northerners I encountered had a soft spot. They’d generally order their snacks in a harsh tone without using any adjectives, but all it would take to turn their sternness to joviality was for me to throw in a little harmless bullshit or self-deprecation. The stereotype Kentuckians have about people from the north is that they’re not friendly. Based on my experience, that’s true a lot of the time – at least until you make an effort to get to know them.”

Residents of Bowling Green and the region will instantly recognize many events depicted in the book. Although I am originally from Tennessee, I have lived more than two-thirds of my life in Warren County. As such, I was not here through the era covered by “Delafield,” but I heard about many of the events described by longtime inhabitants of the area. Case in point, the infamous “biker rally” that took place in 1978:

“Martha Ann Deputy was very savvy for hiring extra help,” Long explains in “Motorcycle Drag Racing,” the 11th chapter and one I was particularly drawn to since I had heard stories of this rowdy weekend since my arrival in Bowling Green in 1981. “Beech Bend Raceway would be hosting an organized riot – motorcycle drag racing. ... I was scheduled to work Thursday in the park at the Cuddle-up stand – then Friday through Sunday at the drag strip, pit side.”

“People were hollering, quickly jumping – jumping out into the rain and away from these renegade bikers,” he continues a little later. “My first thought was maybe these guys don’t know that the midway was for foot traffic only. That thought went away quickly when I saw them turn their bikes around, gun them and head in my direction. ... They rode their motorcycles right up to the front of my stand where I had my mouth wide open. ‘I want a corn dog,’ said the fatter of the two in a gruff voice. ‘Me, too,’ the other one growled over the din of the idling cycles. I picked out two of the nicest looking corn dogs. No need to rile these guys. ‘Twenty-five cents,’ I said. I hand one to the fat guy. He didn’t look at me. Instead, he leaned away from his bike to get at the mustard dispenser. I went ahead and handed the other corn dog to his friend, a greasy, red-bearded dude holding a beer as pretty as you please.”

Needless to say, Long never received anything in payment for the corn dogs as the bikers roared away, leaving only an empty beer can behind. The manuscript is saturated with these little snapshots from Long’s childhood and adolescence; collectively, they provide an invaluable insight into what it was like to grow up when things, shall we say, were a bit simpler and – for better or worse – a bit easier to understand. I was certainly able to relate in an instinctive and profoundly visceral way on many levels.

This is Long’s first book. “He’s been an avid reader all of his life of everything from comic books to classic literature,” his biography notes on Amazon. “He is a humorist, and an established raconteur of somewhat dubious credibility. An alumnus of Western Kentucky University, his education focused on creative writing with appreciations of the Algonquin Round Table humorists

of the 1920s. Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker, Ring Lardner and Franklin P. Adams are his idols – not to discredit many other humorists.”

Personally, I hope it’s not his last. If “Delafield” is any indication of his ability and potential as a writer, I hope he provides us with many more excursions in the future. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.

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