

Hands of Gold

By Roni Robbins

Reviewed by Dan Farkas

A semi-fictional family patriarch near the end of life is given a cassette player to tell his life story; the trek from Europe to Montreal and eventually to New York City, and the raising of a family, with all its wonders and heartaches. The tone is direct, practical, and full of self-deprecating wit told in short staccato bursts, leaving us thirsting for more.

The juxtaposition of the amazing and the mundane give Hands of Gold excellent pace. Not every literary figure has accidentally killed a pedestrian or disarmed a crazed gunman but that the same man was proud of his trained parakeet and his ability to cultivate vegetables humanizes the narrator's life.

Distress over failed health and marginalization at family gatherings serve to portray a palpable sadness for that part of aging we all must face. All the while, the book maintains balance; the narrator's belief in life, love, happiness, and perseverance bubble beneath the surface of the book's saddest parts.

A grander message is available for those who dig beneath the story's surface. The Great War comes early in the book. The narrator asks a historically important question: had Archduke Ferdinand lived, might the Jews of his shtetl have gotten a fairer shake? We are asked to consider man's inhumanity to man, war, anti-Semitism; universal themes...heavy stuff for one man's tale. In our current turbulent times, this man's love of the simple life shows how human we all are. Live and let live is the inference one can draw and apply to those who would espouse hate of any particular group. A tale steeped in Judaism (the book has an ample glossary) invites similar tales from all religions; we're all human. The bold will consider this generality and tell their tales to a cassette recorder or smartphone. The braver still will write books. Humanity benefits from stories like these. Hands of Gold provides a blueprint; it is well worth the read.