

*The Tribal Knot: A Memoir of Family, Community, and a Century of Change*

By Rebecca McClanahan

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. Pp. xi, 324. Illustrations. Paperbound, \$22.00.)

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live," Joan Didion famously declared in her 1979 essay, "The White Album." Essayists, memoirists, and other authors of what is commonly called creative nonfiction tend to live by this motto, organizing the world as they have known and experienced it into narratives in order better to understand the people and events that have shaped their lives. In her new memoir, *The Tribal Knot: A Memoir of Family, Community, and a Century of Change*, Rebecca McClanahan takes this idea farther than many of her contemporaries tend to, writing about family members and experiences that she has learned about through diligent research rather than firsthand experience. The result is a fascinating literary record of one family's history throughout Indiana—including Tippecanoe, Clinton, Ohio, and Lake Counties—and migration to other parts of the country through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In the prologue to her memoir, McClanahan references Patricia Hampl's essay "Memory and Imagination," which—since its first publication in *The Dolphin Reader* (1985)—has been a seminal text for creative nonfiction students, teachers, and practitioners. The reference gives the reader a sense of what McClanahan is endeavoring to accomplish in this project—to cre-

ate a work of nonfiction that does, at times, rely on educated speculation in order to arrange the facts as she knows them into a compelling narrative (particularly as she explores the probable thoughts and motives of long-dead relatives in the book's early chapters). In other words, she tends to begin these chapters with memories or information gleaned from the historical record of photographs, letters, scholarly texts, and other verifiable evidence, then signals to her reader her entry into a self-consciously speculative realm with phrases that describe her as "eager to trace the connections" (p. 62) or "tempted to accentuate the differences among my family members" (p. 137). As a result, *The Tribal Knot* functions as historical text, memoir, and something of an extended personal essay or meta-memoir, meditating on issues of family and loss, while understanding people who lived and died long ago.

It is difficult to think of works of creative nonfiction that have attempted such a feat—most family memoirs, such as Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, or Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*, focus solely on their authors' memories, without the emphasis on research that McClanahan brings to her material. Writers like Sarah Vowell and Bill Bryson research their subjects thoroughly,

but their subject matter is not as personally significant as McClanahan's family history clearly is to her. While others may have produced work that resembles McClanahan's work in some ways, very few have matched the ambition on display here.

McClanahan has combined the historian's scholarly rigor with the storyteller's attention to characterization and language. The result of this combination of approaches is a book that explores the history of a family and a region (specifically, Indiana) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries while simultaneously revealing and reflecting on the inner lives of those people (mostly women, but a few men) to whom McClanahan feels herself connected, before eventually exploring her own experiences with family. For its

meticulous research and attention to detail, McClanahan's memoir ought to appeal to any student of history; for its gripping prose and thoughtful meditations of what life was like for those who lived not too very long ago, the book should appeal to any curious or thoughtful reader.

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### *Almost Worthy: The Poor, Paupers, and the Science of Charity in America, 1877-1917*

By Brent Ruswick

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. Pp. xiii, 265. Illustrations, charts, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$37.00.)

Brent Ruswick opens *Almost Worthy: The Poor, Paupers, and the Science of Charity in America, 1877-1917*, with a tale of misdeeds by the managers of an Indiana poorhouse in 1881. Reports of the events sensationalized the almshouse residents instead of focusing on the evils of the perpetrators—not surprising, Ruswick argues, given the percolating fear of “the seemingly contagious moral and physical disease

known as pauperism” (p. 7). *Almost Worthy* examines the charity reform movement over a forty-year period and explores how some reformers tried to use the tools of emerging social sciences to address and even eliminate the problem of pauperism.

Charity reformers sought to avoid indiscriminate aid because of their shared belief that ill-directed charity only enabled the shiftless and