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Review of *Restoring the Burnt Child: A Primer* By William Kloefkom

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Restoring the Burnt Child: A Primer. By William Kloefkorn. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. 169 pp. \$22.00.

William Kloefkorn's second book of memoirs is a blueprint for restoring lives scorched by the fires of fundamentalist Christianity, WCTU crusaders, cigarettes and whiskey, kitchen matches, sore throats, and thermonuclear explosions. The twelve chapters cover Kloefkorn's life from age nine, when he torched the family kitchen, to age thirteen, when he delivered news of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to subscribers of the *Wichita Beacon*. The book fleshes out stories and personalities already familiar to readers of his poetry: parents and grandparents; life in Attica, Kansas; the slaughter of swallows and rabbits on grandfather's farm; landmarks like Turtle Rock and townmarks like Butch Mischler's Pool Hall and Urie's Barber Shop. Despite the epic suggestions of the number twelve, this book is more focused than Kloefkorn's 1997 *This Death by Drowning*. (Is fire more contained than water, and should we anticipate forthcoming memoirs of air and earth?) Still, jumpcuts across time and geography open the author's scope: like a Twain tale or a Keillor monologue, Kloefkorn's stories begin here, skip to there, circle upon themselves through allusions to previous chapters and digressions which prove to be not so digressive, bringing us safely back through time and space to where we began. "Chronology has at best a habit of collapsing," Kloefkorn writes, echoing Eliot's famous dictum about time present, past, and future and reiterating a philosophy found in Kloefkorn's poetry early (*Alvin Turner as Farmer*, 1972) and late (*Loup River Psalter*, 2001).

Restoring the Burnt Child is also an ideal primer for writers. Although beginners might

have trouble appreciating (or controlling) a structure that seems so random while being so focused, all writers can grasp—and all readers enjoy—Kloefkorn’s vivid recreations of a way of life going fast if not already gone, his talent for seizing the most luminous detail of our gray lives, his love of language, and his feel for the American idiom. Particularly striking is Kloefkorn’s observation that “any story relies upon a melody, however subtle that melody might be.” Particularly pleasurable is the joy of recognizing in a Kloefkorn phrase some subtle echo of one of the local or literary masters of language—Twain or Chaucer, father and grandmother, Sister Hook and her gospel ministry, the denizens of pool hall or barber shop—described elsewhere in the book.

As history both personal and communal, and as performance both written and oral, this book gives us the old maestro at his best.

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