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A Long And Happy Life: A Novel



Synopsis

Ecstatically reviewed and winner of the William Faulkner Award for a notable first novel when it was published in 1962, *A Long and Happy Life* launched the career of Reynolds Price, a writer considered to be "one of our greatest novelists" (Harper Lee). From its dazzling opening page, which announced the appearance of a stylist of the first rank, to its moving close, this brief novel has charmed and captivated millions of readers since its original publication almost fifty years ago. The troubled love story of pretty, headstrong Rosacoke Mustian and the motorcycle-riding, stoic Wesley Beavers, *A Long and Happy Life* beautifully evokes a rural North Carolina now long gone.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Rosacoke Mustian has been in love with Wesley Beavers since she spotted him in a pecan tree eight years ago. She has endured his stint in the U. S. Navy; and as Reynolds Price's 1961 debut novel *A LONG AND HAPPY LIFE* begins, Rosacoke is still in the dark as to Wesley's feelings about her as he prepares to take a job in Norfolk, Virginia selling motorcycles. Most of the rest of this near perfect short novel-- 195 pages--is about this young woman's search for love with a person who probably doesn't deserve her. Of course there is a whole passel of supporting characters in Price's story set in rural North Carolina in 1956. Just having read Mr. Price's excellent memoir *ARDENT SPIRITS* where he talks at length about writing this his first novel, I wanted to reread it to see if it holds up after these many years. It does. Mr. Price gets all the details just right: from cherry Jello to Kool-Ade to the local church's Amen corner to horehound candy to a punch board (something I had not thought about in more years than I care to remember). Men get their hair cut at home by family

members; and the church, of course, is central to these characters' lives regardless of how they live when they are not within its doors: whether it is an emotional African American funeral for the young Mildred and friend of Rosacoke, who died in childbirth (the opening scene of the novel) or the closing Christmas pageant in the white Delight Church where Rosacoke plays the Virgin Mary and Wesley is a less-than-enthusiastic Wise Man. The last twenty or so pages that capture this event, complete with the Christmas carols that the pageant players sang, took me back to every similar Christmas in the Baptist Church I grew up in rural East Tennessee although the characters had different names in my mind's eye.

I am somewhat surprised to see that there have been only three other reviews of this novel, which now is almost 50 years old. But then Reynolds Price seems always to fly just under the radar of the general American literary public. A LONG AND HAPPY LIFE was Price's first published novel, and since Price was not yet thirty, it seemed to promise a long and productive literary career, which by and large the years have borne out. Price was from the Piedmont region of North Carolina, which is where A LONG AND HAPPY LIFE is set. The time is the late 1950's. The central character is Rosacoke Mustian, who is in her early twenties, an age for marrying. The leading (in truth, for Rosacoke, the one and only) candidate is Wesley Beavers, with whom she has been entranced since she was fourteen. The novel begins with a brilliant scene where Rosacoke is on the back of Wesley's motorcycle as he passes a short funeral procession, with the pine box coffin in the back of a pick-up truck and "one black boy dressed in all he could borrow set up in a ladder-back chair with flowers banked round him and a foot on the box to steady it". The coffin holds Mildred, a young black woman who was a girlhood friend of Rosacoke's and who had died in childbirth, and Wesley is driving Rosacoke to the funeral service, where she will be the one person "representing the white friends". The next day Wesley will be discharged from the Navy and it is high time for Rosacoke and Wesley to decide whether or not they will try to make a long and happy life together. The novel covers the next half year while Rosacoke and Wesley circle round and round that issue. It is a rural community of swimming holes, church picnics, horehound candy and jello desserts, birthing-at-home with a mid-wife, and Christmas pageants.

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