

Tom Brokaw. A Long Way from Home: Growing Up in the American Heartland. New York: Random House, 2002.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

American autobiographies possess a long and distinguished lineage. Some of these efforts are franker and more revealing than others; most tend toward self-justification and putting conventional spins on reality. In A Long Way from Home: Growing Up in the American Heartland, Tom Brokaw, a small-town boy from South Dakota, writes a more interesting memoir than most, if only because we know that the story he tells will eventually find him in the anchor booth at NBC Nightly News at a salary of millions of dollars a year.

The reader would like to learn how he got there, and there are clues here regarding the man's native intelligence, ample ambition, and instinct for the main chance. The narrative carries him to 1962, when, at age twenty-two, he headed off to his first permanent job in the newsroom of KMTV, the NBC affiliate in Omaha. He had just graduated from the University of South Dakota and married high school classmate Meredith Ault. He was a lucky and promising fellow, but there was little apparent in his story up to that point to indicate that in less than two decades he would emerge as one of the most prominent TV journalists in America. This tale, in Brokaw's own words, is rather "an attempt to document the manner in which I was raised in the America of the post-World War II years." In writing it, he wants to "express my gratitude to the people who raised me, and to the character of life in the American heartland from which I have drawn so much."

Brokaw's talent as a wordsmith shines through in this engaging and informative excursion into life in small-town South Dakota during the forties and fifties. It was a time of remarkable change and development during which the impact of American popular culture increasingly was felt in a state that was rapidly losing its sense of remoteness. Although it was not obvious to him as he was growing up and attending school, South Dakota's small towns were beginning to undergo wrenching transformations that would witness most of them losing population, stores on Main Street closing, and the economic functions of the smaller towns being taken over by the larger towns. That was not at all apparent to young Tom, first, in the recently established town of Pickstown on the Missouri River, where his father worked on the construction of the massive Fort Randall Dam. With its winding streets, brand new school, stores, churches, and homes, Pickstown seemed a model of the type of new suburban developments that were springing up all over the United States during the years after World War II.

Later, after moving to the much larger town of Yankton before his sophomore year in high school, Tom would have a much larger school in which he could hone his competitive skills on the basketball court and football field, in student government meetings, and on the dance floors. Gifted with intelligence, good looks, charm, and self-confidence, the young man epitomized the type of popular, talented, and seemingly effortless student that shows up in everyone's high school yearbook as the "most likely to succeed"—the one that every boy wants to be friends with, every girl wants to date, and all the mothers in town want for a son-in-law. Brokaw is not too falsely modest to omit from the story his string of personal successes: starting guard on the varsity basketball team, lead role in the all-school play, class and student-body president, Boys State

governor, pal of Governor Joe Foss, and, perhaps most impressive to many readers, someone who hung out with college frat boys while still attending high school. But despite the “good boy” reputation he had acquired as a youngster, he doesn’t hesitate to talk about his faults, including excessive self-regard, reckless behavior (in pre-drug days, this consisted of drinking beer, skipping class assignments, and failing to show up for play rehearsals), and general lack of purpose. He disappointed not only his parents, teachers, classmates, and would-be girlfriend (Meredith, before he mended his ways, leading her to change her mind about him); he disappointed himself.

As all good stories must (at least, stories about successful people), this one pictures him turning around, straightening up, and finally getting back on track. The conversion didn’t happen overnight, however. There were several false starts, first during his freshman year spent at the University of Iowa, and later back in Vermillion at the University of South Dakota. Brokaw identifies the crucial turning point as a conversation he had with political science professor William Farber, who told him he ought to drop out of college until he got his head on straight and decided what he wanted to do with his life. It took a bolt from the blue like that to force the brash young man to realize that success would not be handed to him on a silver platter. The episode strikes one as interesting and plausible, but the reader is left wondering whether maybe there’s more to the story than the author reveals.

Beyond learning about Brokaw—the boy turned man—we also are presented much to consider regarding the environment in which he grew up: small-town South Dakota during the post-World War II period. Every state resident reading this book will—consciously or unconsciously—match his or her own experience against Brokaw’s as he describes it in these pages. Family relations, life in the household, school days, bb guns, outdoor life, collecting rocks and fossils, hunting and fishing, a profusion of sports, pool hall forays, trips to faraway places, the arrival of television, odd jobs, mowing lawns, Boy Scouts, pursuing girls, the rise of rock ‘n’ roll, stints at local radio stations—these are the things that occupied the thoughts and actions of a typical, All-American boy going through grade school, high school, and college. Only sporadically do we get a notion that there was a world outside—civil rights on the rise, the Cold War stewing, and nearby Indians. But this is a schoolboy memoir, not a comprehensive history of the era. History emerges here, but as seen through the eyes of a not all that untypical schoolboy.

This young man, however, will take the talents and ambitions conferred upon him, grasp at opportunities offered him, and rise up the Horatio Alger ladder of success that sixties and seventies America offered him to become one of the most respected and admired television journalists in the country. We can be grateful that he took the time to turn his gaze for a moment upon his own childhood, for this book illuminates in perceptive and revealing fashion what it might have been like for any schoolboy to have grown up during this period of time in this little piece of the Heartland.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. This book culminates in 1962, when the author graduates from college, marries, and goes off to his first permanent job in Omaha, Nebraska. Uncertain of his final destination, he was “determined to get well beyond the slow rhythms of life in the small towns and rural culture of the Great Plains.” But he also expresses nostalgia for

South Dakota and says that “in a way I never want to leave. I am nourished by every visit.” (3) Discuss Brokaw’s ambivalent attitude toward his home state.

2. At several places in the book, Brokaw discusses the original inhabitants of the land and expresses dismay at what white Americans have done to them. Because he doesn’t talk much about politics and public issues (aside from civil rights), why do you think he devotes so much space to American Indians?

3. At least a half-dozen times in the book, Brokaw lists and talks about values he learned as a child and which he associates with South Dakota: thrift, compassion, perspective, pragmatism, utilitarianism, hard work, self-reliance, self-esteem, practicality, productivity, mainstream Christianity, cleanliness, frugality, insularity, etc. How accurate do you think these attributions are?

4. While generally admiring in his descriptions of the culture of the state, Brokaw also approvingly cites author Kathleen Norris’s reference to contradictions and tensions existing in Dakota culture (21). What are some of these contradictions, in your opinion?

5. The author feels personally slighted when people sometimes mock South Dakota (22). How common do you think this is, and how do you react in similar circumstances?

6. Brokaw talks about small-town “Saturday nights” (51-52). What was it about this phenomenon that is so memorable and so appealing to some people?

7. For grandmother Ethel, who had been raised in Minneapolis, adjusting to farm life on the prairie was a difficult task (52). Is this a common response of outsiders moving into the state, and can you empathize with the viewpoint?

8. Brokaw identifies the religion of his youth as “mainstream Christianity with a decided emphasis on joy and positive thinking, light on guilt or complicated ritual (79).” Is this a fair description of ordinary religious practice in the state?

9. Smoking was a common practice, and families were known by the brand of car they drove (usually Fords or Chevys) when Brokaw was a child (83). How have these and other cultural practices changed since then? History, it has been said, is the study of continuity and change. What, in general, has remained continuous in the culture over time, and what has changed?

10. Discuss the family dynamics of the Brokaw family. For instance, do first-born children, like young Tom Brokaw, have a sense of special privilege (85)?

11. Without a TV in their house most of the time, young Tom felt cut off from the world (90). What do you remember about TV watching when you were a child, and how did TV change your and other people’s lives?

12. At age twelve, Tom traveled by bus to Minneapolis with a schoolmate (90-92). How have things changed since then? Or could a twelve-year-old still do that?

13. Brokaw names some of the “seminal figures” in his life (besides his parents, they were mostly teachers). How important are such people in kids’ lives?

14. Brokaw notes various qualities of his that helped open up opportunities for him. Especially important, it seems, was his ability in sports. But he also notes that sports are often overemphasized in small-town America (115). Do you agree? What do you think the appeal of sports is to local people?

15. In what did schoolboy Tom Brokaw’s rebellion consist? He observes that “the idea of rebelling against convention or authority was not in my makeup (131).”

How much room for rebelliousness is available in small-town South Dakota (and America generally)? How has the situation changed since Brokaw's school days?

16. Cracks in the culture began to appear and a new youth culture emerged in the United States during Brokaw's high school and college years. He mentions James Dean, Elvis, rock and roll, and other changes (143-45). Discuss the variety of factors that "opened up" alternatives, options, and choices for youth during and after the fifties.

17. Brokaw was a kind of "All-American boy" in high school. Would you have liked him? Do you like him now? What's to like or not to like about him?

18. Do his descriptions of life in high school and college ring true? Why or why not?

19. Knowing what we know about him from this book, was his future success likely, in your opinion?

20. In considering jobs that he might do, young Tom thought of the law, politics, and journalism. He wanted a life of action, but he also wanted security (163). Was he being realistic? How do most young people think about the future, the jobs they want to get into, and the kinds of lives they want to lead?

21. "Local radio was, in many ways, the central nervous system of the Midwest (169)." Is that still true today? How has life changed?

22. "As a young white male in the fifties, I was a member of the ruling class It was a white man's and white boy's world (176)." In your opinion, was this true? If so, was it fair? Have things changed much since then?

23. The author quotes novelist Saul Bellow's statement, "Tell me where you come from and I will tell you what you are (229)." Do you agree with that idea? Does it help explain who you are?

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Thomas John ("Tom") Brokaw was born in Webster, South Dakota, on February 6, 1940, the first of three sons of Anthony O. ("Red") Brokaw and Eugenia Conley ("Jean") Brokaw. His father's position as construction foreman in the Army Corps of Engineers took the family from Bristol to Igloo and Pickstown, finally landing them in Yankton in time for Tom's sophomore year in high school. After graduating from the University of South Dakota with a B.A. degree in political science in 1962, Brokaw worked for KMTV, an NBC affiliate in Omaha, between 1963 and 1965. After a year's stint at WSB-TV in Atlanta, he joined KNBC-TV, Los Angeles, as reporter and news anchor. In the early 1970s he moved to Washington, assuming the job of NBC White House correspondent during the Watergate Era. He hosted the "Today" show from 1976 to 1982, when he took over as co-anchor with Roger Mudd of "NBC Nightly News." He was elevated to sole anchor the following year and remained in that position until 2004. During his tenure, in competition with Dan Rather at CBS and Peter Jennings at ABC, the news anchor position evolved into a more glamorous and powerful role. By the late 1990s, NBC had risen to top position in the ratings, and Brokaw personally captured a slew of awards, garnering respect for his smooth, low-key delivery on camera and for his intelligent reporting and interviewing. After leaving the "Nightly News," he continued to do special reports, covered presidential nominating conventions, and temporarily hosted "Meet the Press" after Tim Russert's untimely death in 2008.

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