

The Longest Decade: A Literary Memoir of the 1940s

by Heather Farmer

Review by Jerry Waxler, author of *Memoir Revolution*

4 out of 5

Memoirs offer an exciting language by which we can understand our own individual journeys, at least the parts we can remember. But when you look back on your earliest years, events start to become blurrier, or out of reach altogether. What was going on in the world when you were born?

For most of us, those stories seem maddeningly inaccessible. But Heather Farmer, author of the *Longest Decade*, who was born during a terrifying time in her family's history, she was unwilling to accept "no" as the final answer.

Tapping into a rich family tradition of sharing stories, along with several written memoirs, a stash of meaningful letters from the men fighting in the war, and a historical period which could be researched at the library, she allowed her informed imagination to return to those years leading up to her birth, and reconstruct her family's circumstances in a stunningly relatable and compelling account.

She calls it a "fictionalized memoir" – which put me off at first. Which is it? My assessment after reading it is that, informed by every morsel of insight she could muster, the author did everything in her power to portray these characters as close to their real lives as possible. In the process, she has created an intricate, emotionally sophisticated portrayal of the ensemble cast of her close-knit extended family. After reading it, I feel I could reach out and touch some of the main characters.

And there is a historical bonus built into the storyline, providing a gut wrenching view of the Australian experience of World War II. Australia was in the cross-hairs of the Japanese ambition to dominate the Pacific, and the potential suffering seemed so close I could feel it closing around my heart. I could almost literally hear the approaching drums (or in this case sirens) of war. Horrible.

But despite all these magnificent features of the book, her incredibly ambitious goal of telling the story of so many of the individual emotional struggles of her extended family stretched me as a reader.

Because the author had a large extended family, and because she is attempting to set the stage across the whole clan, the story defies one of the basic tenets of a "good beach read." It has too many characters and will require that either you have an incredible memory for names (I don't), you are willing to jot down notes, and rehearse who is who (I wasn't) or you simply take it on faith that the important relationships will pop to the forefront as needed. This was my approach, and while I experienced a bit of angst trying to keep people straight, in the end, I understood the main characters and felt entirely satisfied that she had invited me into a realistic and compelling family drama.

What made the emotional power of the story so compelling? I would have to give credit to Heather's brilliant, emotionally evocative scene building. She takes me so far into the hearts of her characters that I found my eyes tearing up when they suffered a loss. This kind of emotional connection between the characters and the reader is the hallmark of good writing, and she achieves this effect throughout the book.

By the end of the book, the timeline of *The Longest Decade* catches up to the author's earliest memories. As the author grows old enough to actually have first person stories she wants to share, the book moves more into this traditional first person point of view. Amid those early memories, she provides some of the best child-voiced descriptions of sexual abuse and harassment I've ever read. As I close the book and reflect on the journey she's taken me on, I have the uncanny, and quite satisfying sense that I've just read the prequel to a Coming of Age memoir.

The biggest difference between *The Longest Decade* the traditional memoir genre is that the story does not take place from within the awareness of the main character. In much of the story, the main character was not even born yet! And yet there are things about this story that ring so true and resonate so powerfully with the importance of memoirs as a genre that I am willing to expand my definition.

In the end, looking back on the experience of reading the book, I would say she aimed incredibly high, attempting to create a complete account of the emotional drama of her extended family and so, even though she did not write a perfect book, she still achieved an admirable feat of family storytelling.

If you are looking for a model of a story that can be reconstructed of your family just before you knew them, and if you aspire to be the family or community story teller for this ensemble cast, start collecting stories. And read this book. It is an awesome example of how you could achieve this goal.