



Closing Time: A Memoir

By Joe Queenan; Viking, Published by the Penguin Group, 2009, 338 pages

Closing Time: A Memoir is the chronicle of Joe Queenan’s quest to escape. Escape his father’s abuse, escape a life of humiliating poverty, and escape his fate—as predicted by his father—that he would “never amount to more than a pimple on an elephant’s behind.”

Today, Queenan is a regular contributor to *The New York Times*; his writing has been featured in magazines including *Time*, *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*; and he is the author of 10 books. So it is not revealing the end of his memoir to say that not only did Queenan escape, he transcended his upbringing and everything that his family expected of him. What makes *Closing Time* a compelling read is not discovering his fate but rather learning about the people and pursuits that empowered his escape.

Queenan was one of four siblings, children of Irish Catholic parents living in inner-city Philadelphia in the 1950s. Though he dedicates *Closing Time* to his three sisters, they receive only brief mentions in the book. And though his mother did not divorce his father until Queenan was an adult, she plays a small role in his upbringing and in the memoir.

Joe Queenan Sr. is the star of *Closing Time*. A charming, witty, well read man, he is ruined by alcoholism and beaten down by a life of poverty and failure:

My father got broken when he was young, and he never got fixed. He may have wanted to be a good father, a good husband, a good man, but he was not cut out for the job. He liked to drink, but unlike some men who like to drink, it was the only thing he liked to do.... When the fancy struck him, and he was not too tired, he would take off his belt and beat us. Other times he would announce impending beatings, only to explain that, as he was too tuckered out to administer a whipping that day, we’d have to reschedule.

Throughout *Closing Time*, Joe Queenan is rescued from this abuse by a series of relatives, childhood employers and friends’ families who offer safe havens and windows into a better life.

Uncle Jerry gives young Queenan “a day pass from the stockade” with road trips to southern New Jersey for pizza; first boss Len, the eccentric owner of a local clothing store, teaches Queenan how to tell stories and throw curveballs; his best friend’s family “opened their doors on weekends whenever my father was on the warpath.”

To an interesting cast of characters—and to his father’s love of writing and books—Queenan credits his great escape from poverty and from perpetuating the cycle of alcoholism and violence that marked his childhood:

Everyone who is saved is saved because someone tossed him or her a lifeline, or, in my case, numerous lifelines. It may be a parent, it may be an employer, it may be a teacher, it may be a priest...it may even be a parole officer.... Nobody is saved all by himself. 📖

I Am a Voice

To a child silenced by injustice,
I am a voice.

To a child with whom the world has
broken faith,
I am someone to believe in.

To a child who knows only rejection,
I am unconditional acceptance.

To a child lost in a nightmare,
I am permission to dream.

Amid confusion, I am certainty;
amid instability, constancy.

Amid cynicism and shame,
I am innocence restored.

In a dark labyrinth of bureaucracy,
I am a way through—
a steady arm around the shoulder,
a calming voice in the ear.

Where others are moved to pity,
I am moved to action.

I am as quick to confront the powerful
as I am to comfort the powerless.

Though I may be visited by discouragement,
I do not play host to despair.

I do not relent;
I do not back down;
I do not give up.

In a system of shifting loyalties,
my loyalty never wavers.

For while my appointment may come
from a court,
my calling comes from within.

To the child neglected,
the child abused,
the child cast upon the mercy of an
often merciless system,
I am heart and caring and courage
personified.

I am a CASA volunteer.

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