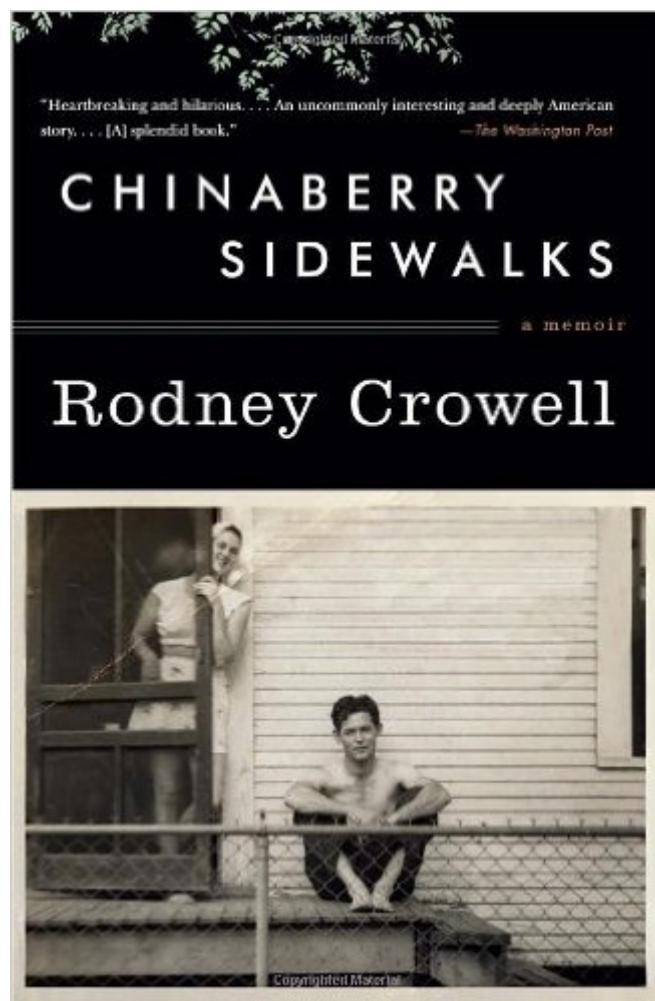


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Chinaberry Sidewalks: A Memoir



Synopsis

In a tender and uproarious memoir, singer-songwriter Rodney Crowell reveals the good, the bad, and the ugly of a dirt-poor southeast Texas boyhood. The only child of a hard-drinking father and a holy-roller mother, acclaimed musician Rodney Crowell was no stranger to bombast. But despite a home life always threatening to burst into violence, Rodney fiercely loved his mother and idolized his blustering father, a frustrated musician who took him to see Hank Williams, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, and Johnny Cash perform. Set in 1950s Houston, a frontier-rough town with icehouses selling beer by the gallon on payday, pest infestations right out of a horror film, and the kind of freedom mischievous kids dream of, Chinaberry Sidewalks is Rodney's tribute to his parents and his remarkable youth. Full of the most satisfying kind of nostalgia, it is hardly recognizable as a celebrity memoir. Rather, it's a story of coming-of-age at a particular time, place, and station, crafted as well as the perfect song.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Buy it. It is rare that I read 130 pages on the afternoon that a book is delivered. It is rarer still when I read the other 130 pages within the next two days. Rodney writes books as well as he writes songs, and he really writes them himself. This is not a money making vanity publication, it is a classic homage to a highly dysfunctional, poverty stricken, stinky bottle of polluted water that slowly transforms into fine wine through the grace of, well, Rodney mostly. A lesser man would not have survived. You really need to read it, it is a work of love, hate and art. I expect many more novels from Rodney, it is obvious he has the gift.

For years I've listened to Rodney Crowell's music, wondering where the fiction begins and the "truth" ends in his songwriting. With "Chinaberry Sidewalks," the pieces all come together in this riveting memoir of his crazy quilt childhood in Texas. As I read "New Year's Eve, 1955" (the first chapter) my nose drew closer to the page, my pulse quickened and I realized I was in for one hell of a joyride. Crowell creates full characters in his book - full of insanity, pathos and love. Reluctantly accompanying his mother during the Pentecostal-soaked summer of 1955, Crowell writes: "Hating these holy-rolling, speaking-in-unknown-tongues free-for-alls she loves so well, I do my best to make the trip more miserable than it already is." But even under the preposterous tutelage of a hellfire-and-brimstone preacher - "that poor man's Billy Graham," Crowell discovers a moment of grace, "In the wink of any eye (the preacher's), I saw a compassionate, tolerant and nonjudgmental God of love and great humor. My own faith was planted as a seed that morning, and there are days its fruit sustains me still." Like Brenda Peterson's memoir, "I Want to Be Left Behind," it takes those who have survived a childhood of "chock full of sin" to speak with the authority of forgiveness, wisdom and love. As Crowell says in his song. "I know all I need is love." And he proves it with "Chinaberry Sidewalks."

A lot of us who grew up in the South, can tell you stories of people they've known who are like Rodney Crowell's family. The dirt poor, hard loving, hot tempered couple who spend every Saturday night at the honky tonk and most every Sunday morning at the Pentecostal church being preached to about the hell fires that await them. Few people could tell such stories and be as honest and as entertaining as Mr. Crowell has done in Chinaberry Sidewalks. The childhood he describes will make you cringe at times and also make you laugh. The love he has for his parents is always evident especially in describing his relationship with his mother towards the end of her life. It's easy to see where the material for his Country song writing and singing career come from. If you're a fan of personal memoirs like "All Over but the Shoutin'" or even "Coal Miners Daughter" should enjoy this book from Mr. Crowell. I'd like to see a follow up covering his career and marriage to Roseanne Cash. I'll bet there are a few good stories somewhere in there as well.

I read the review in the New York times, which was written by a book critic known to never take it easy on a writer, so I bought the book. It is poetic and linear, perfectly told. The words are chosen with care in each line, but reading it you can't help but know this is a talent of Crowell's not just the hard work and editing.

Being a long-time Rodney Crowell fan, I was excited to read his memoir. I've always loved his songwriting, so I assumed I would enjoy his prose just as much. I was a bit leery, however, since I'd read that the memoir didn't talk about his music career. Wow! This book captured me from the first chapter. In every story he told, I was there. He captures the moments; the feelings, the sights, the smells, even, of every childhood memory. Many people, if they choose to admit it, will relate to the dysfunction of his parents' relationship, and thus, the dysfunction of the entire household. The fears, the sometimes disgust, the need to have a parent BE a parent. I don't mean to convey that this book is a downer. It's just the opposite. It's often very funny, and it ultimately portrays the reconciliation that occurred between Rodney and his parents, and the mutual understanding and love that prevailed. I didn't want to let this book go. I was sad when I finished it. I wished there were more stories to tell, of these fascinating, flawed people.

Chinaberry Sidewalks is singer/songwriter Rodney Crowell's entertaining memoir about growing up poor in Texas, with fairly dysfunctional, albeit characteristic, parents. His father was an aspiring singer who made a local name for himself, crooning at icehouses for several years, with young son Rodney backing his dad up on drums. Crowell's mother was a sometimes overboard Pentecostal tongue-talking whirlwind who was prone to severe epileptic seizures, and still managed to get into bar-room brawls to fight for her man when needed. This is basically a coming-of-age story, with tales of crazy neighbors, mixed in with sensitive issues that happen frequently when young boys are growing up and finding their way. I was impressed with Mr. Crowell's writing; he not only tells an interesting story, but writes superbly. This entertaining book is easy to read; just perfect for reading a chapter every night at bedtime. It's also reassuring to know that kids can survive less-than-ideal childhood experiences, and still grow up knowing that they were loved and admired their parents. I really liked Chinaberry Sidewalks and would recommend it to anyone who enjoys reading memoirs and coming-of-age stories.

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