



Oh, Beautiful: An American Family in the 20th Century

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An extended Italian immigrant family clings to community life amid tragedy, the Spanish flu, Prohibition, and the Great Depression. A broken Polish immigrant family leaves a legacy of heartbreak, separation, Civilian Conservation Corps redemption, and World War II heroism. From these dissimilar backgrounds emerges a quintessential American family, one whose members embody the conflicting social movements of their times: a staunchly Catholic Polish immigrant U.S. Marine Corps father, an emotionally effusive Italian mother, an Oliver North son, a Hillary Clinton daughter, a mentally ill sister, a jock brother, a lesbian rocker, and a gay male activist. In an era of bitter cultural polarization, *Oh, Beautiful: An American Family in the 20th Century* celebrates what has kept America together. This true story is an engrossing portrait of an American family and an evocative documentation of nearly 100 years of American history. Read a free excerpt (Chapter One) either here on the author page or at www.johnpaulgodges.com/excerpt1.html

Oh, Beautiful: An American Family in the 20th Century Details

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From Reader Review *Oh, Beautiful: An American Family in the 20th Century* for online ebook

Caren says

Wow! This sprawling book is a love letter to Mr. Godges' family, but also a remarkably sensitive and intuitive history of the ordinary American in the twentieth century. I can imagine this book being a wonderful supplement to a textbook in a high school American history class. I only wish someone in my family had written such a book before our family's stories were lost to time. And lost those ordinary stories certainly are without someone like Mr Godges to record them. Mr. Godges comes to the task with training in journalism and in American history and he puts those skills to use in this well-researched story. Once I got a chapter or so into the book, the words fell away and I felt I was hearing this story of very real people from a master storyteller. The pages flew by. The story ranges from Italy and Poland, to small town mid-America, to baby boom kids growing up in California. The range of the American experience encompassed in just this one family is amazing. Each of the six baby boom kids also represents unique aspects of the American culture. This paragraph from p. 401 seems to sum up much of the message of the book: "The working-class immigrant families were playing out the classic American drama. Their resilience and teamwork in building stronger communities in the beleaguered flatlands beneath the Hollywood sign, that national shrine to vanity and fame, posed a stark contrast between what America meant to different people and, in many cases, to different generations. It occurred to me that America would cease to be America without a regular infusion of these kinds of stalwart, tight-knit immigrant communities." I also liked the way Mr. Godges was able to examine the intricate relationships within his own family, always with the kindest eyes. At the end of the book, in conversation with a cab driver after his parents' 50th wedding anniversary mass, he puzzles through the balance their two personalities achieved and compares that to the balance the American national character juggles.

"Immigration. Assimilation. Going our separate ways. Coming back together again. It's a big balancing act. A great big balancing act.....Dad and Mom carried on their own version of the same argument. He became this rugged individualist, the self-made man who stood up for his beliefs no matter how many people he pissed off. But she's always been the communitarian. For her, the whole point of life is to share it and enjoy it with one another while we have the chance. Otherwise, life ain't worth the trouble" (p. 481). Mr. Godges, I'd like to give a heartfelt thanks to you for sharing your family's story with the rest of us Americans. It's a story we need to hear, over and over again.

Danie says

Honestly, the original reason why I wanted to read this book was the cover picture. The young man standing in front of a US CCC truck. I'm not exactly sure why, but when I first saw it it peaked my interest.

Of course, that was only the original reason and the book itself wound up mightily surpassing the photo on its cover.

I have nothing in common with the author. Both side of my family have been here in the US since before there was technically a US of A, whereas the author's family was one or even no generation removed from Poland and Italy. And yet in some sections of the book every few pages I'd find myself nodding or whatever because something that the author described was part of my childhood too, though it wasn't always in the exact same way. In the case of the Beer Barrel Polka it wasn't a recording but a piano roll, and now for the

rest of the week I'm going to have it stuck in my head thanks to the author.

Aside from the lingering music in my head I was impressed with just how well the author manages to write both a memoir of his life and his family while also writing a pretty good book about American History. Oh, and I thought it was pretty well written too. It flows well except at the very beginning where sometimes it seems a bit jumpy with a jarring change between whose eyes we're seeing one particular story, but on the whole it's an enjoyable read and even a pretty quick read too (which cannot be said for even some of the very best memoirs). I even loved that the author was able to write every one in his big family, from aunts and uncles to brothers and sisters in such a way that I was able to keep all the many people in the story pretty much straight. A sign of a good book, and a skill that even some fiction writers I have read aren't able to do.

Everyone needs to read this. It's touching, and interesting, and c'mon, doesn't the cover just say 'read me, or else'?

Elizabeth says

I won *Oh, Beautiful: An American Family in the 20th Century* from Goodreads firstread giveaway. I was so excited to win this book and as soon as I received it I started immediately. I absolutely loved reading about the story of John Godges family in America and what influenced them. This is one book that once I started reading I had a very difficult time putting down.

The book begins with the author's maternal great grandfathers journey to America which in turn led to his grandfather Serafino immigrating to America with his wife Maria. We follow the life of Maria and Serafino through good and rough times. They started their journey living on Lehigh row in Mason City, Iowa. As their family grows, Maria and Serafino work hard to provide for their family experiencing prosperous moments as well as a few heartaches. As the children grow the story begins to follow one of the younger daughters named Ida.

At the same time we begin to learn about the author's paternal family. We meet Jozef as a young child living in Poland while his father goes to America in search of a better life for his family. After a lengthy time period Jozef ends up in America and struggles with adjusting.

After completing high school, Ida desires to get out of the small town in Iowa and heads to California with an older sister. There Ida meets Jozef while he is studying accounting. The relationship between Ida and Jozef evolves throughout the story. They experience many blessings but also have trials to work through.

We eventually meet the author and his siblings and get to hear their stories as well. The world is seen differently by each of the siblings, giving all of them very different experiences and outlooks. As they grow up and experience their own good and bad times we also get to see how some of the relationships work.

The last pages of the book contain additional photographs of the family throughout time. This is something that I truly enjoyed after completing the book.

I enjoyed everything in the book from the style of writing (which is very engaging) to how the story is laid out. I definitely recommend this book to anyone who loves history, family stories, or just a great read! I should also note that I am recommending this book to be added to the Chautauqua Scientific Literary Circle reading list.

Clytee says

This book is self-published, and the reason I knew about it was reading about it on a genealogy blog. This man has written an amazing family history of his parents and siblings and self. He is my age, his life unfolded in the same American eras mine did, his parents in the same era my parents did. It is an American history, it is a brave disclosure of a big family with lots of challenges, and it is a fantastic family history. It's about immigrants (we all descend from immigrants) and immigrating, about the power of families for good and ill. It's about what it is like to be Catholic through and through. There are some real surprises about how things turn out, about what little kids in a family turn into. I think it is well written. How he got all the details he did are beyond me. How he got family to discuss and give him quotes about themselves is beyond me. It's a big book, 400 and some pages but very captivating and there were times I couldn't put it down. It is going to be my pick for my book club for next year because I think it is an important book with lots to discuss, and I am always trying to preach the doctrine of learning and recording family history, and he has done that so well.

Dree says

I requested this book in the First Reads program because 1) I read a lot of memoirs and 2) my dad's side is Italian also. It turns out that many of the places he author and/or his family was, I have been. Kind of weird.

Godges managed to organize this book so it flows--from past to present, oldest to youngest. And it works, even with 8 separate stories. And I truly appreciate that he never argues or implies that his family is somehow unique or better than others--they may have been raised to believe they were (due to being Catholic, etc), but the text makes it clear that everyone has a story. That does not mean that anyone is better, or any story is more unique--it is simply that everyone has a story to tell. This makes for a readable book and an enjoyable book.

His family's history is fascinating, happy, sad, and bittersweet. He does an excellent job of showing how, for example, his father's forced choice to essentially abandon his mother for his father at the age of 11, affected his entire life as he looked for family, created his own, and did everything in his power to keep them together and give them all the best start in life he could. Without a strong father figure himself, he became one.

I could not help but compare his mother's side's experiences in America to my father's side. The generations are off, with my grandparents being 10-15 years older than the author's parents, and both being born in the US. My Italian great-grandparents came to this country for much the same reason his grandparents did: from a small mountain farming town, where there was not enough land to pass down due to big families. But the similarities pretty much end there. My great-grandparents came, as did several of their siblings--and everyone had very small families (0-3 kids). They are Catholic, but not to the extent of his family. It's all quite different.

I have lived in Westchester for 10 years--where much of the book takes place--and am very familiar with many of the places mentioned. My next-door neighbor worked luggage for United at the same time his mother was working there. We know many families with kids at Visitation School. I also lived in Berkeley, having arrived for undergrad about 15 months after the author completed grad school there. I have spent a

fair amount of time in SF--as a kid visiting grandparents, as a high schooler going to Giants games, as a college student doing research, as an adult visiting family and eating gnocchi at Michelangelo Caffé.

This was a very enjoyable read.

Carol says

Thank you so much, Mr. Godges for writing this book. Your book seems like a song of America. There were lyrics to songs that I hadn't sung for so long. When I came to them, I sang along. Both sides of my family have been here for hundreds of years, yet so many of your family's experiences are mine too.

I loved how you told the story of one your mother's side of the family and then your father's and finally focused on your own immediate family one by one. Your mother could have been my child hood friend's mother easily. Your father, joining the Civilian Conservation Corps in Michigan as an escape from his broken family could have been my father. He joined it in Indiana when his mother and father divorced and his mother could no longer feed here children. Your sister Geri could have been my Aunt Pody. You told the story of Americans the way that it should be told as a memory of all the good and the bad, all the tragedies and celebrations of family. You also expressed the feeling of pride of being an American and the understanding of what it means to be an American.

You don't have to be an American Catholic to appreciate this book, you just need to share in the common experience and learn what is good from it and how to improve it.

Thank you again, Mr. Godges for writing this song to America.

I received this book from GoodReads and the opinions above are my own.

Donna says

I so enjoyed reading this book. As a novice genealogist, I've often thought about how I would write the story of my family and this book is an example of a great way to do it. John covered all the joys and heartaches and struggles of a family with differing attitudes but strong beliefs. I really liked the book.

Laura says

I would like to acknowledge winning this book as a giveaway on Goodreads. The author shipped it to me very quickly with a personal note and autograph. I am very impressed and will be starting to read it very shortly.

I finished this book and loved every page of it!! This author mingled his personal family history with actual historical events and coordinated them perfectly with interesting cultural information making this enjoyable and entertaining. This book was impossible to put down and so obviously well researched. It was simply a joy to read!!

Dolly says

I won this book as a first-reads copy on Goodreads book giveaways and I am so glad that I did. The book is not short - it has 532 pages - but it encompasses about 100 years of family history and it's a fast read, so it's not too long, either. I liked the way the book was laid out, too. Part one was about the grandparents' journey, Part two was about the parents' journey and the author and his siblings' childhood years, Part three was about the tumultuous 80s and 90s, where the family discovers their own way, and finally, Part four brings them all back together for their parents' 50th Anniversary. It was an engaging story and it elicits many different emotions - joy, sadness, shock, disappointment, hope, determination, and love (among others). I appreciate the amount of research and the painstaking effort of committing such poignant memories to print. My favorite parts included the sections where the Di Gregorios become established in Iowa and the detailed descriptions of Joseph's (Jozef's) wartime experiences during WWII, probably because this was long before my time and it was a glimpse of the time when my grandparents were young. All in all, it was a fascinating story and I highly recommend it for anyone who enjoys biographies and family histories. Thanks again, for the opportunity to read this wonderful story!

interesting quotes:

"Church is right here," Serafino thumped his chest, having learned to look beyond monuments and shrines. "If it's not in your heart, it's nowhere." (p.16)

"...the seven Yankee virtues of work, patience, perseverance, thriftiness, frugality, ingenuity, and resourcefulness." (p. 63)

"The first lesson he learned is that the greatest gift God has given human beings is 'wolna wola,' or 'free will.' Free will doesn't mean that humans are free to do as they please. On the contrary, it means that humans bear the burden of choosing between good and evil." (p. 95)

"From his own experience, he concluded that people who divorce lead unhappy lives and that divorces destroy children most of all. He believed that nothing is more important for children than a responsible father and a loving mother; therefore, he concluded, divorce simply does not happen between a responsible father and a loving mother, because no things could be more mutually exclusive than divorce on the one hand and love and responsibility on the other." (p. 112)

"He found his personal sources of strength and resilience in those three allied forces that were intangible yet mutually reinforcing: hope, grace, and purpose." (p. 134)

"...If it was his finest hour, the reason was this: He had discovered himself, in all his uniqueness and individuality, in the service of something greater than himself." (p. 135)

"Choose what is right, love one another as God loves you, and work for what is good for the world." (p. 358)

"...the Hindu concept of 'saccidananda'...combines three Sanskrit words that represent the three components of God: sat (being), cit (consciousness), and ananda (joy). Being, consciousness, and joy correspond to God the Father (the source of being), God the Son (the self-awareness of God on Earth), and God the Holy Spirit (the joy that comes with self-awareness of God). What better definition of a Holy Trinity

could there be than "being conscious of joy"? Once I learned the meaning of 'saccidananda,' I could never make the sign of the cross in the same mechanical way again. Hinduism had taught me about Catholicism." (p.378)

"...the Gandhian notion of 'swadeshi'...translates crudely to mean 'patriotism,' or 'service of immediate neighborhood." In religious terms, 'swadeshi' means that people should adhere to the religion into which they were born. They should seek to correct its defects, to assimilate into it the truths of other religions, and to build a fellowship of faiths, each spurring the others in the pursuit of truth." (p. 379)

"It was exhilarating to see firsthand how the greatest hopes and optimism sprung from those who possessed the least and who had sacrificed the most." (p. 401)

new words: riven, munificent, punctilious, abstemious, lugubriously, abjure, syncopation, fulminated, paroxysms, penury, sacerdotal

Brandy says

This book was amazing. I expected it to read much like a history book, but it is so much more personal than that. I am not sure that it was more special because it was a Goodreads giveaway, but I do not think so. From the beginning the story grabbed me. The author states that this introspective of his family was a way for him to learn what America was, and who Americans were and are. He defines what it means to be American in a way that many people, I think, have forgotten--or maybe never really understood at all. I felt a deep connection to his mother's family, because I remember that I grew up in much the same way, though under different circumstances. I grew up as a child of the '70s, but still on a farm where we picked our own crops and shared the rest; where my grandmother's house would always be filled with the various scents of canning spices and holiday goodness; where my grandfather could be heard coming in from the field--the thump of his boots on the porch, the squeaky screen door, and the squeal of my grandmother when he goosed her lightly and kissed her cheek. This story made me remember sitting on the front porch and watching the old cars slowly go down the road, listening to the crickets and frogs at night, and listening to my grandfather's stories of how HIS grandfather came to America and how much of a blessing it was to live in a place where we could all be ourselves and be what and who we wanted to be.

This book is a reminder that while we may disagree politically, culturally, and religiously, there is always a place for the American dream in America, and we should never forget that we do live in a great country.

Megan says

What does it mean to be American? I am American because my German-Polish-Ukrainian ("and an itty-bitty-bit-of-Dutch") self was born in Pennsylvania and not Odessa or Krakow or Dresden. This is because my great-great-grandparents rustled up some courage and inspiration to travel to this land of opportunity, whether leaving with relief or forced to make sacrifices. I don't know exactly who, where or when these events happened, but 'Oh, Beautiful' makes me want to find out!

This is an excellent book, partially because it is so well written, and with such passion! It is mostly an excellent book, however, because it is an excellent story. Any epic family saga that begins with hobos on a train is destined to be an awesome read!

Memoirs must be tough to write, pouring over old memories and airing family laundry to complete strangers eager to read every word. A big Thank-You to John Paul Godges for taking time to write this, to include old family photographs (in one of which the guys look eerily like extras from 'the Godfather') and to do all the research it must have taken to accurately portray this much of the past.

Readers will enjoy thoughtful, heartfelt, and hilarious stories spanning generations of lives intertwined with American history. Full of sadness and pain, but also personal growth and immense hope, these personal histories will make an impact on you! They may spark an interest in genealogy, or they may inspire you to pick up a musical instrument and attempt to play it, join the military, learn how to surf, cook Italian food, become a teacher, or volunteer for AIDS awareness charities. Regardless, you will have a BYOOO-tiful time!

Thanks again goodreads giveaways for this free book, and thanks to John for not only signing my copy but adding some postcards to help get the word out on this amazing journey of a book!

Rick says

This is a beautiful book and not just in the title. The author has done an excellent job of telling the story of his family and their journey to the American dream. It is well written and an excellent read. I have enjoyed every page of it so far. Since it was in Minnesota and I was in Arizona it has taken me a while since getting back to be able to read it since one of my children found it first, she has also enjoyed it very much. I recommend it to anyone who has an interest in the immigrants that made this country what it is today.

The Book is called OH, Beautiful! and is so much better then the back cover describes it. John Paul Godges is an excellent author and tells a wonderful true story with all the color, joy and agony of that time period.
Eileen L Bremner

Melissa says

I received this book as a Good Reads first read. I'm not even 100 pages in and already, I'm in love with this book. It's well written and has a way of making history tangible. From the beginning, the experiences people are going through make the story seem unreal, and yet, it is.

Update: March 11, 2012 - Finally Finished

I've been trying to figure out how to put into words just how this book reached me as a reader, as a human being, as part of a dysfunctional family. Most people shy away from what makes them vulnerable and uncomfortable. They hide the parts of themselves that they are not proud of, even the parts of other people that embarrass them. Those people can learn a valuable lesson from Mr. Godges. He has embraced that vulnerability and exposed himself, his family, his community, and his history in a way that takes nerves of steel. His portrayal of the history of his family and how he grew to be the man he is is raw, honest, and damn gutsy.

Mr. Godges clearly has made the decision to own who he is. He makes no excuses and expects no approvals from the reader. It takes a very special kind of honesty for one to be able to be who they are without apologies to others, or themselves. If more people were able to embrace themselves and share themselves the way that Mr. Godges has, the world would be a far kinder and more tolerant place.

Read this book. Read it for what it is with no judgement. Take the parts that resonate with you and leave the rest. Or take it all and use it as inspiration to be who you are with no excuses, no apologies, no regrets.

Oldroses says

One of the reasons a lot of people give for not reading books on history is that they are not relevant to their lives. I have to agree with them that most history books are boring recitations of dates, wars, treaties and the important figures of those eras accompanied by dry analyses. It is difficult to imagine what life would have been like for ordinary people during those times.

John Paul Godges offers a different take on history. He writes about 20th century history from the point of view of his family's history. Starting with his maternal grandparents' experience immigrating from Italy through his parents' 50th wedding anniversary party, he illustrates the important events of the previous century.

Suddenly, history becomes relevant. Thanks to the Godges family, readers experience vicariously the major events of the 20th century and how they impacted the lives of ordinary people. Instead of the "immigrants came to America seeking a better life", we are treated to stories of what life was like in Europe and what "a better life" actually meant once people arrived here. Likewise, the turbulence of the 1960's had different effects on different people as illustrated by lives of different members of the family.

I learned a lot about the immigrant experience from this book. I hadn't realized that some immigrants came here only temporarily to make money and then return home or that sometimes they went back and forth a few times before settling down. I was also surprised to learn how readily they helped each other with loans of money.

Ending a story such as that of the Godges family is always difficult. The author chose the celebration of his parents' 50th wedding anniversary which is a logical endpoint but I felt that he lost focus in this chapter. All the preceding chapters in the book followed the lives of the family members along side the events of the 20th century. In his final chapter, Godges chose to get very personal and talk about the dynamics of his family. It would have been more consistent and more satisfying for the reader if he had used the anniversary party as an opportunity to look ahead to the next generation and talk about the differences and similarities between their lives and the lives of those who had gone before them.

Beth Benko says

Great story about immigration in the early 20th century. The author and his siblings were born in the middle of the 1900's -- weren't a lot of us -- and the tales of their growing to adulthood echo some of mine.
