



The Train of Small Mercies

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In haunting and crystalline prose, *The Train of Small Mercies* follows six characters' intrepid search for hope among the debris of an American tragedy. In New York, a young black porter struggles through his first day on the job—a staggering assignment aboard Robert F. Kennedy's funeral train. In Pennsylvania, a woman creates a tangle of lies to sneak away from her disapproving husband and pay her respects to the slain senator, dragging her child with her. In Maryland, a wounded young soldier awaits a newspaper interview that his parents hope will restore his damaged self-esteem. And in Washington, an Irish nanny in town to interview with the Kennedy family must reconcile the lost opportunity and the chance to start her life anew.

In this stunning debut, David Rowell depicts disparate lives united by an extraordinary commemoration, irrevocably changed as Kennedy's funeral train makes its solemn journey from New York to Washington.

The Train of Small Mercies Details

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Author : David Rowell

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From Reader Review The Train of Small Mercies for online ebook

Lisa says

Remember the car trips as a child when you watched the houses you passed wondering who lived there, what were they like...sometimes you were lucky enough to have your voyeuristic desires filled by an actual scene of life. Perhaps two children squabbling over a swing and whose turn it is, tugging the chains to and fro, hissing, squealing, maybe calling names. Then your car glides on by; the story of the swing is left behind. You never know who wins the war, or perhaps it all ended when one lost her grasp and banged her head on the curb, or maybe his best friend came up with a new pack of army figures and all interest in the swing is lost. There is no resolution; you are only left to wonder.

Much of the art of *The Train of Small Mercies* is owed to this gliding past life stories in progress, being granted permission to see for a bit, but then the train moves on, and we are left to wonder. Some readers may be apt to fuss about the lack of "closure,"; we have become such suckers for closure these days, but tidy resolutions would have devalued the whole story.

The premise is that on the torpid summer day on which the funeral train carrying the body of the slain senator and Presidential candidate, Bobby Kennedy, people are making plans to watch the train pass by so that they might honor the beloved Senator, a man to whom so many in the nation were looking towards for the fulfillment of their hopes. Thus, hope becomes a central theme in the novel. The author chooses roughly a half dozen people from whom to spin his story: a young Irish nanny who was to be interviewed for a position with the Kennedy family, a boy who has already had his summer marred by trauma and confusion, a no longer young man who hopes to have an inaugural pool party in his above ground pool in hopes of recapturing something vague, a black college student who is working the first day of his summer job with the train company, a woman who must create a web of deceit to see the passing of the funeral train since her husband is dead set against the Kennedys, and a young man and his family learning to adjust to his disability since his return to Vietnam, plus be at their best for the young reporter who is coming to interview him. Finally, there is the concierge at the Churchill Hotel where the Irish girl is staying.

Rowell imbues each glimpse into these ordinary peoples' lives with a poignancy and concern. His device of offering a glimpse into one set of characters' lives then gliding off to another creates an added wonder and curiosity. I do not want to say suspense since that word lacks the subtlety for the actual sense created. Perhaps, heightened concern best names the feeling. These people are so very really, so fraught with sincere hopes and concerns that it is impossible not to care for them. While there is no resolution to any of the vignettes, their stories are in no way diminished, in fact they are left more alive and subject to our wonder.

Susanne says

I listened to this one (read by Jeremy Davidson) -- and about the time I found myself tapping my foot wondering "is all this detail GOING anywhere?" it abruptly ended. I wanted to sputter "Whaaaaat?!" The author introduces us to a host of diverse characters with nothing at all in common but the passage of Robert F. Kennedy's funeral train through wherever it is that they are. There's the young black man on his first day on the job as a porter on the train, an Irish nanny who had hoped to work for the Kennedys, the woman who lies to her husband about how she is going to spend her day and is terribly dismayed when her little girl falls from the jungle gym and bruises her face ('how am I going to explain her bruises?'), a strange couple with a

new swimming pool in the back yard who can't get the chlorine level right, a group of young boys, one of whose fathers spirited his son out of school to go on a peculiar fishing trip, a wounded soldier home from Vietnam enduring a newspaper interview. A long, long string of carefully constructed vignettes. And then it's over. That's it.

I felt the same way after finishing Stewart O'Nan's "Last Night at the Lobster" some years ago. Beautifully written, but surely there was meant to be some point to it all?

Amy says

David Rowell's debut, *The Train of Small Mercies*, is an exceptional novel that is set on the day that Robert F. Kennedy's body was transported by train from New York for burial in Washington DC. Inspired by photos taken of mourners that lined the tracks, and actual events of the day, Rowell has managed to recapture the complex emotions that were so much a part of the unsettled 1960s. Creating a character for each of the states that the train travelled through Rowell presents the reader with many of the experiences that defined the era. In New York, the young African American working his first day of his summer job on the train assigned to transport the body. In Pennsylvania, the wife who must construct an elaborate hoax in order to hide her desire to view the train from her controlling husband. In Maryland, the young man who has lost a leg in Vietnam waits to be interviewed by the local newspaper, and act his parents hope will return his damaged self-esteem. In Delaware, New Jersey and Washington more common, yet very intimate experiences are played out. *The Train of Mercies* is much more than just a snapshot of a day in history however; Rowell fully captures the various sentiments of the time as well as the loss of innocence of the country. Insightful and thoughtful this is a novel not to be missed.

Colleen Turner says

I reviewed this book for www.luxuryreading.com.

The Train of Small Mercies by David Rowell tells the story of what happened on June 8th, 1968 as Senator Robert Kennedy's funeral train made its procession from New York to Washington, D.C., not from the perspective of the Kennedy family but from that of six ordinary people along the train's route. Each person, while in no way connected, has a shared purpose of not only moving the train along its path but of highlighting the good and bad of America at this volatile time.

What I liked most about *The Train of Small Mercies* was the way the author used these seemingly ordinary people to show not only how devastated the nation was about Senator Kennedy's death but how turbulent the country was at that time. It deals with the aftermath and protests against the Vietnam War, issues with freedom and equality for all people, regardless of race, gender or class and the continued rollercoaster of trying to find solid ground in an ever changing environment. Some people seemed to long for the simpler times while others had a renewed sense that maybe it was possible to start over and make a better life for themselves. The funeral train seemed to bring all walks of life together in one collective day of mourning, even if for only a short time.

Barely touching the surface of these characters' lives, I wish the author had written more about each character and given a more finished aspect to each storyline. Some of the stories felt barely explored and

none ended with any sense of closure. This could be the author's purpose, giving a quick glimpse into the American life and then letting the people move on unobserved, but I would have enjoyed finding out where these characters went when the train rolled past.

Jenna says

Read (quite slowly) for Adult Book Club. I began this book on audio and I honestly could not keep track of any of the characters other than Maeve and the porter. It was too much skipping about and too much detail without a cohesive link, other than everyone thinking about and heading towards the train. Giving up on the audio, I managed to finish in print. I don't know if it's because I don't have a good context of this period in time, nor will be able to say "I remember where I was on that day," but it was just slippery and disjointed and difficult to follow these very different perspectives.

Having said that, it was an interesting slice of life detailing that period in America's history and the political unrest, I would have just preferred had we kept to maybe two or three perspectives for a longer, more in depth period of time, rather than six within the span of a single day.

Jim B says

Consider this a series of short stories -- although the book summaries invariably state that the Kennedy train unites these stories, the people themselves do not cross paths, nor do the stories have anything in common except that all the people have Robert Kennedy on their minds on the day of his funeral.

In itself, that's an interesting beginning. I didn't feel that the stories went anywhere. I like books with good characterization, and in that regard, author David Rowell does an excellent job.

Jeremy Davidson has a good voice for this day in American history.

Carol says

I liked this book. Six vignettes were presented of people who admired Robert Kennedy and were in similar circumstances of sorrow from his death. These people were in different states through which the train carrying Kennedy's casket to Washington was traveling. The characters included a young disabled Viet Nam vet recently returned from the war and a young Irish woman coming for an interview to be the Kennedy family's next nanny. Also included were a young black college student with a pregnant girlfriend on his first day of a summer job on the train, and a young boy recovering from a recent kidnapping by his father during a messy divorce. The last two characters were a woman married to an Archie Bunker like Kennedy-hating successful businessman and a woman who I felt had an underdeveloped character married to an ordinary guy with a pot smoking friend and a fetish for swimming pools. Ironically, due to events beyond their control, two of the characters missed viewing the train. Rowell did an outstanding job of describing the turbulence that existed in the sixties. I would like to hear more of each of the characters' stories.

Kathy McC says

A piece of America's hope was buried with JFK. Another piece went with Martin Luther King. Bobby Kennedy took another huge piece of hope with him. This novel chronicles the lives of ordinary people united by the solemnness of the journey of the Kennedy funeral train as it makes its way from NY to Washington. People from all walks of life make plans to line the train route and pay their last respects. Basically the novel is made up of short stories about average people whose lives were impacted by the assassination of Robert Kennedy. It is a poignant, honest, at times ironic, depiction of America in 1968. Seen through the eyes of a Vietnam War amputee, a group of African American train porters, a young Irish immigrant, and other families spread throughout the train's path, the reader can feel the gamut of emotions that reverberated through out the U.S.

At the end of the novel, the soldier says, "Some things cannot be explained". Kudos to Rowell for not trying to.

Marcia Call says

I wasn't sure what to make of this book when I started -- a story about several people who experienced the funereal journey of RFK's body from New York to Washington -- but was very pleasantly surprised. The story takes on the rhythm of the train, moving slowly from one story to the next -- a recently returned Viet Nam vet, a woman conspiring to watch the train, reunited boys, a childless couple whose great joy is their new above-ground pool, and a college boy interning aboard the train. You should be prepared though for some turns in the story that will take your breath away. I found myself gasping at some points, having to put the book down and regain my breath.

This is an amazingly fast and rich read. If you take this book with you on vacation, you will find yourself turning page after page quickly and then wondering where the time has gone. Definitely pick this book up . . . especially if you remember anything about the period or time.

Ti says

The Short of It:

Compelling and thought-provoking... The Train of Small Mercies affords us a tiny glimpse of people made somber by tragedy.

The Rest of It:

In New York, a young black porter struggles through his first day on the job-a staggering assignment aboard Robert F. Kennedy's funeral train. In Pennsylvania, a woman creates a tangle of lies to sneak away from her disapproving husband and pay her respects to the slain senator, dragging her child with her. In Maryland, a wounded young soldier awaits a newspaper

interview that his parents hope will restore his damaged self-esteem. And in Washington, an Irish nanny in town to interview with the Kennedy family must reconcile the lost opportunity and the chance to start her life anew.

I don't think I've ever read a book quite like this one. As the train moves through each state, you feel as if you are one of the mourners, waiting for the train to come through town. There is so much going on with these people. They all have their own challenges and somehow, they come together for this one purpose.

What I enjoyed most is that the story flows effortlessly. The story's pace never falters and although the story's point of view alternates between characters, the momentum is never lost. I think in part, this is due to how well-developed each storyline is. The chapters are brief, but include just the right amount of detail.

I eagerly turned the pages and enjoyed this one quite a bit. The Train of Small Mercies will appeal to all types of readers.

For more reviews, visit my blog: Book Chatter

Kathleen Hagen says

The Train of Small Mercies, by David Rowell, Narrated by Jeremy Davidson, Produced by Penguin Audio, Downloaded from audible.com.

This is a debut novel with an unexpected catalyst. The train that crossed the country from New York to Washington D.C. with Bobby Kennedy's casket, a train where crowds were at every conceivable place along the tracks to view the casket going to its final resting place. We follow several characters, trying to pay homage to this senator who for them embodied so much hope for the future. There is a Black man on his first day as a porter in the dining car of the train itself. There is a woman who took her little daughter and left, without telling her husband, to find a place to witness the passing of the train. There are four boys playing along the tracks waiting for the train to come. There is a Vietnam vet just home from the war where his leg had to be amputated. A journalist assigned by his paper to follow the train is looking for a story that will restore his career. An Irish immigrant, hoping to be hired as a nanny for the Kennedy kids, who because of the shooting now has to change her plans. There is a father who kidnapped his son from his ex-wife and there is a warrant for his arrest. All of these people, and others, are brought together to see the Bobby Kennedy train surge by. An excellent book.

Martha says

This novel reads like a slow strobe light, shining in one day on the lives of ordinary people who set out to watch Robert Kennedy's funeral train as it slowly made its way from New York to Washington, D.C. The author said his inspiration was RFK Funeral Train by Paul Fusco, so I got a copy from the library, and there were the faces of the people David Rowell introduced us to in his novel, as real as can be. Which was what drew me into the characters--they were like neighbors, people you know a little bit about, who you hear stories about, who surprise you with a call when they know you lost a loved one or have been sick because

they know a little bit about you.

I felt like the author gave us just enough, allowing us to imagine these lives continuing, decisions being made, bitterness being deepened or resolved, marriages getting stronger or falling apart, children getting on with their own lives, having children--everyone on the brink of the rest of their lives.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

June of 1968 was a time of great change and turmoil in America. Citizens were divided over the war in Vietnam. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been killed just a couple of months before, and the civil rights movement had to find new footing. Then Bobby Kennedy won the California presidential primary, after which he was shot by Sirhan Sirhan.

David Rowell provides a slice out of the lives of six characters and their families on June 8, 1968. Each resides in a different state where Robert Kennedy's funeral train will be passing through on that day. One character is on the train as an employee. Some of the characters are quite ordinary, perhaps *too* ordinary. They arrange their day around the arrival of the funeral train---squabbling, socializing, and grieving in the meanwhile. One is a Vietnam vet, recently returned home after losing a leg. I found his story to be the most compelling of the six, as he comes to terms with his loss and his family tries to project a cheery outlook for his sake.

Rowell's writing style is clear and concise. He brings in a lot of the cultural touchstones of the era, which will have sentimental value for many readers who can remember 1968. The disconnected presentation of the six story lines as the day progresses makes it a little difficult to follow. It does get easier as you continue reading and start to remember who each of the characters is. The book only covers one day in their lives, so the end feels inconclusive with respect to most of the people involved.

What I gained from the book was a greater understanding of the collective grief of the nation over the loss of Bobby Kennedy. I knew a lot about John F. Kennedy, but not so much about his brother. I had not been aware of how much hope the black community had placed in Bobby after Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed.

Laurel-Rain says

As Robert F. Kennedy's somber funeral train journeys from New York to Washington, D.C. in the summer of 1968, assorted crowds gather at various points along the way to show their respect.

A fictional cast of characters with numerous hopes and dreams bring sundry tales to the mix.

For Lionel Chase, a young black man on his first day as a porter on that train, and for Jamie West, a disabled Vietnam vet, home from that war and facing the obstacles of his damaged life, the journey of the train seems especially significant. Other characters whose lives do not intersect with these, and whose only connection seems to be their quest to find something inspirational about the train journey, include a young Irish girl who had hoped to earn a nanny position in the Kennedy household; a woman who spirits her young daughter away with her to watch, spinning lies to her disapproving family to cover her absence; and a sixth grade boy, recently "kidnapped" by his father, who joins his friends to "reenact" the assassination near the train tracks

during their wait.

Because of an accident early in the journey, however, the train is delayed by four hours. As the anxiety increases, the tension builds. In the interim, the characters' stories are intensified, with numerous mishaps, misadventures, and opportunities to showcase their individual searches.

Themes of hope, fear, and journeys weave their way into "The Train of Small Mercies," creating a melodramatic backdrop for this story of life in the 1960s. With the Vietnam War, Civil Rights, and the rift amongst the American people over numerous philosophical differences, this tale is served up elegantly and profoundly. We see ordinary people setting aside their differences on this one day, and how the day plays out for each of them will inform the rest of their lives.

Alternating between the characters, we also notice the dramatic effects of the day on each, while feeling some of the emotions wrought from the experience. In the end, none of the characters intersected, nor did the stories actually bring about any major conclusions. Instead, the tale showed how one day could create subtle changes in individual lives when set against a larger drama.

Four stars.

Deedee says

The concept was good: tell stories of people waiting to see the funeral train of Robert F. Kennedy go by in 1968. The execution just didn't work. The author took 6 sets of people (who do not ever get to know each other) and writes about a slice of life for each set, a slice which includes brief intersections with the funeral train. The people in the slices didn't seem like real people -- just names with situations. The events didn't seem rooted in the 1960s -- it could have been 1978 or 1988 as easily as it was 1968. And, unexpectedly, two sets of situations involved (view spoiler), which if I had realized before reading the book I wouldn't have read the book. Maybe if the novel were explicitly organized as a set of short stories? and if the author realized that setting the novel in the 1960s means more than the occasional mention of "Vietnam" or "Nixon"?
