



TITLE INFORMATION

HE WAS THERE ALL THE TIME

Nick Hoffman

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BOOK REVIEW

In this hybrid memoir/anthology, a career newspaper writer offers autobiographical vignettes alongside his previously published columns.

Having lived in rural west-central Pennsylvania his entire life, Hoffman has an intimate familiarity with the region's peculiarities. The author recognizes the importance of regional identity, from the overconcentration of churches and fraternal organizations to the unique local vocabulary (including the collective pronoun *you'ns*). This understanding, born of a lifetime of experience, is reflected in the columns he wrote for one of the area's daily newspapers, where he worked for three decades as a writer and editor. In this collection, the author provides a sampling of his columns—most of which offer inspirational messages drawn from community stories and his personal life—supplemented with additional commentary for context and elaboration. While regional peculiarities receive ample attention—from nostalgic reflections on the area's history to the demographic divide between Republicans in Jefferson County and Catholic Democrats in its county seat, Brockway—the book also provides intimate glimpses of Hoffman's own personal history. The author reflects on topics including his love of golf, his struggles with alcoholism, his college years spent at Penn State, and his childhood in a family with twice-divorced parents ("The net result," he writes with characteristic humor, "is a family tree with a lot of branches"). A key theme of the book is the centrality of religion to both Hoffman personally and to the area he calls home—Catholic clergymen make significant appearances in the columns, and Christian prayers, Bible verses, and poems are referenced throughout. Hoffman's love for both family and community come through on nearly every page, but the collection opens with a frustrating discussion of the dichotomy between faith and science in which scientists are reduced to straw men who believe that random cellular goo explains "everything that ever has been." This out-of-step preface aside, the book generally eschews divisive commentary for a down-to-earth celebration of the simple joys of small-town life.

Earnest, mostly lighthearted takes on life in rural America.