

Otherwise Normal People: Inside the Thorny World of Competitive Rose Gardening.

By Aurelia C. Scott.

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Review by Jim Delahanty

A few disclaimers: I am quoted in the book on page 67. Accurately. Many of the people in the book are personally known to me, and I consider them to be rose friends. And, finally, I engage in the practice of exhibiting roses. My efforts are light years away from the activities described in the book because my rose interests are not quite the same (I have never exhibited a hybrid tea rose in any but the most exotic of classes). And, finally, one of the incentives for my casual exhibiting habit is the camaraderie of rose show exhibitors.

It would have been easy to write a book, exploiting the obsessions with and devotion to rose exhibition; Ms. Scott avoids that cheap shot pitfall. She accomplishes the most difficult of tasks—writing about people with outsized personalities with an underlying affection that permits the descriptions of their foibles. That affection enables her to accept and admire exhibitors without wishing to be one of them. Probably the most unusual thing about the book is that it was written by someone who is not a competitive rose show enthusiast and embraces the organic orientation to gardening, generally dismissed if not disdained by competitive exhibitors.

The narrative framework commences in Maine and climaxes at the San Diego National Rose Convention of 2004. The cast of characters includes most of the national figures in the scene at that time, including the giants of the field like Dr. Tommy Cairns and Luis Desamero, Jeff Stage, Cal and Barbara Hayes, Kitty and Bob Belendez, Rachel and Phil Hunter, and Bob and Dona Martin. Ms Scott accurately apprehends the appetites of those who engage in exhibiting through a sense of competition, as well as those whose love of the rose is inexplicable as well as undeniable. She captures both the presence and the frisson of authority that accompanies even the mildest of inquiries from Dr. Cairns as well as the laser-like intensity of Cal Hayes in the pursuit of his sixth triumph in the Nicholson Bowl challenge class. Perhaps her greatest insight relates to the egalitarian nature of rose exhibiting. Prowess in rose exhibiting is the determinant of acceptance in that world; truck drivers, doctors, lawyers, and ribbon clerks are equals because other than excellence in showing roses, nothing matters. The world of rose exhibiting is a meritocracy in its purest sense, because ‘Only the rose matters.’ (page 55.)

She also grasps an odd feature of rose friendships—that they are peculiarly functional in operation. People who grow and love roses interact on the basis of the rose association. Rose Exhibitors may not know the economic status, the familial or marital status or much else about rose friends—largely because these things are not important in comparison to the overweening fact of mutual admiration or adoration of the rose itself. It was not for naught that the rose show is the metaphor for social change to a fairer and better world in James Hilton’s “Mrs. Miniver.”

Attractive as Ms Scott finds competitive exhibitors and their quirks, she acknowledges that the hobby can be tough on families and social relations. Non-exhibitors simply do not ‘get’ the nuances or even the lure of the game. She recites more than one tale of marriages gone sour and children alienated because of the inability to reconcile the personal with the rose-related. Equally, she notes that in more than a few cases the non-exhibiting partner either joins in the activity or embraces the calendar of those who exhibit. Husbands as well as wives, can assume a secondary or tertiary role, as can significant

others of both sexes. And, as with any face to face and close knit society, feuds and schisms have an intensifying effect that far outweighs the value of any issue at stake. The short-lived rule about no assistance, physical or otherwise, from other rosarians—a product of a desire to purify the competitive aspect of the exhibiting at the expense of the social cohesion--faded into quiet obscurity once the proponents retired from competition; however, the echoes of discord last longer than would otherwise be the case were the associations not so conflicted. The imperatives of competition and the imperatives of friendship can collide.

Ms. Scott is aware of the power of outside forces to affect the world of the rose show. The number of local rose shows has declined, and in the face of escalating costs and diminishing numbers, even the Spring and Fall National Rose conventions may be merged into one as the forces of less disposable time, the demands of two career families, and the diminution of housing space devoted to gardening erode the number and interest of competitors. The tension between rose exhibitors and rose gardeners is acknowledged by the author; the enthusiasm and the energy of rose exhibitors means that they set the agendas and calendars of rose societies and orient programs toward things that interest them. This does not always sit well with those who do not exhibit and some rose shows end because the cadre of people needed to stage a rose show disappears. Sometimes the very intensity of the exhibitors leaves them insensitive to the concerns of non-exhibitors to the point where the gardeners decline to support a rose show because the local society no longer represents the interests of the gardener group.

Two nicely written chapters frame the discussion of Old Garden Rose enthusiasts and the delirious world of rose rustling. Ms Scott recognizes that the unwritten rules of conflict between the American Rose Society and the OGR organizations have been the object of attempted rapprochements by the American Rose Society. But the obsessions of the Old Garden Rose aficionados are just as intense as those of exhibitors, but about different items—including rose identifications and discovering and preserving ‘found’ roses.

Finally, the male domination of the world of exhibiting roses manifests itself both in the focus on motivation—the need of many exhibitors to find a space away from the world of career and commerce, as well in the dubious practice of spraying toxic chemicals without the requisite protective garments. And, of course, the gene for competition associated with type-A behavior goes hand in hand with earnest attention to detail and the search for perfection.

This is a book you need to read if you ever hope to understand the allure of the competitive rose show. In ‘Games People Play,’ Eric Berne discussed games as a means of managing life crises with greater or lesser dysfunctionality; Ms Scott depicts a world in which the games—whatever the origins—contribute to the sum total of the beauty in the world. And that justification alone may be sufficient.

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