



The Last Fine Time

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THE LAST FINE TIME is a splendid series of portraits: portraits of a family, of a city, of a time and place in America's history. At the center of Klinkenborg's portraiture is Eddie Wenzek (Klinkenborg's father-in-law), son of a Polish immigrant, who in 1947 inherits the Thomas Wenzek Restaurant from his father. Eddie is a particular man in a particular city in a particular time, and Klinkenborg's main concern is with detailing the effects of change upon a family and a culture.

Klinkenborg focuses upon Eddie Wenzek, but in the process of telling Eddie's story Klinkenborg necessarily draws us into the lives of Eddie's family—his father and mother (Polish immigrants), his Aunt Julia—and illuminates parts of that immigrant experience for us, revealing the subtle links between the family's European past and their American present.

The specific geography of that American present is Buffalo, New York: more precisely, the Polish east side of Buffalo. Indeed, THE LAST FINE TIME is an especially effective portrait of a culture and of a period: It evokes the Polish-American culture of that Buffalo neighborhood, as well as the evolving popular culture of postwar America, with its several economies and sociologies. Klinkenborg brings to life the essence of this neighborhood existence; advertising slogans and rhymes, brand names and manufacturer titles appear in catalogue-like listings and serve as histories-in-miniature of the time and place.

What emerges as the dominant historical force here, urging its way through the lives of this culture, is change. The war works its various acts of magic upon the neighborhood; economic and racial shifts occur, people and their cultures dislocate and relocate. The neighborhood, as the Wenzeks know it, dissolves. The bar is bought out, is transformed into The Scorpion, falls into bankruptcy, and eventually collapses to the crushing change of the wrecking ball.

Klinkenborg is a splendid and provocative writer. And when he asks us (as he frequently flat-out does), as readers, to engage our imaginations in bringing this history—these histories—to brilliant and persuasive light, we do so willingly and with much resulting pleasure.

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