

By AMY FINNERTY AUG. 19, 2007

In his memoir, "Jubilee City," the Oklahoma-bred painter Joe Andoe reports that he once got so tanked at a reception in his honor that he forced kisses on married museum curators and had to be dragged from the premises. Twice. Later, his dealer was afraid the spectacle would be taken as a publicity stunt. Some readers may suspect the same about his book, whose subtitle, "A Memoir at Full Speed," suggests that Andoe is eager to depict himself as a raw and reckless sort.

In his account, the art world is built on "charming diplomacy and snob appeal," and he contrasts it unfavorably with the good-natured shabbiness of his native milieu. "I grew up kind of poor on the edge of town and having to sit through my grandma's church," he writes in his unpolished, teen-speak prose. Yet he ends up sipping Bordeaux at Aquavit with art dealers. The grandmother who helped raise him when his father was stationed overseas subsisted on "a cocktail of diet pills, church and the stress of enabling her alcoholic husband." While Dad was an engineer, Mom is described — not without affection — as a "gum-popping space cadet" convinced that her "big slug of a baby" was somehow damaged. Growing up in a landscape of subdivisions, fundamentalists, hard drugs and rock 'n' roll, Andoe didn't know from curators and lofts. His outcast status was established in the fourth grade, when he sat at a table with "the other underachievers," goofing off.

The author recounts his wayward youth unreservedly. His adolescent rap sheet includes assorted abuses of hallucinogens, alcohol and motor vehicles, and we're always sure that redemption, when art supplants acid, is a page away. But it takes decades. It's true that he works as a laborer, attends college and finally settles on art. Shrewd and talented, he becomes a bona fide painter. Yet years later, as a New York artist, husband, father and homeowner, he's still getting into brawls, jumping turnstiles and chasing cocaine with liquor.

With women, he is ardent but infantile, and his delivery is so deadpan that we're never sure whether he's self-critical or clueless. He describes meeting his wife while he was an art student at the University of Oklahoma: "She looked hot. I dropped her roommate like a hot horseshoe, and then turned on the tractor beam." She was "bossy and cold but the sex was great," so they got married. But they "really didn't like each other." That's his ex, the mother of his children. Settled in New York, Andoe slaved away at his easel while she brought home a paycheck. He was the long-suffering, stay-at-home artist-dad to her pitiless harridan. (It would be fascinating to hear her side of the story.)

He continued "drinking and drugging" between custodial visits with his kids. The artists he met in New York were privileged and knew how to work a room, he says, while he had only the work ethic that kept him churning out paintings. They

include images of livestock and prairies. But a creative detour in midlife resulted in an outpouring of portraits that, according to Andoe, are all variations on Kay, his first love. He includes images here of girls (or a girl) on the cusp of womanhood, hanging out in cutoff jeans, or unclad and smoking. Whether they are all Kay is unclear, but they share an unmistakable coming-of-age vibe. One critic has called Andoe's work "cowboy noir with a fashionista twist," but the artist's own description is more precise. Both his landscapes and his portraits evoke "the stillness at twilight when animals come out into the open." Certainly, he's a connoisseur, not only of the outdoors, but also of the cocktail hour, and of women. Yet there is a sadness about his paintings.

Andoe, while living in the Chelsea Hotel, became infatuated with a temptress — the "Marilyn Monroe of the East Village" — and "tied himself to the mast" as he was buffeted by her tantrums. He has a gift for ruthless analysis, and among the disjointed microchapters of his life story, there are exacting self-revelations every few pages. He describes his relationship with his beloved daughter this way: "While I had huge Viking hammers, she required fine delicate Swiss watch tools and somebody with the motor skills to use them correctly." Such tools he may lack, but now that he's sobered up, he's able to survey the car wreck of his early life and turn it into a kind of art.

#### JUBILEE CITY

A Memoir at Full Speed.

By Joe Andoe.

Illustrated. 207 pp. William Morrow/HarperCollins Publishers. \$22.95.

Amy Finnerty is a regular contributor to the Leisure & Arts section of *The Wall Street Journal*.

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