

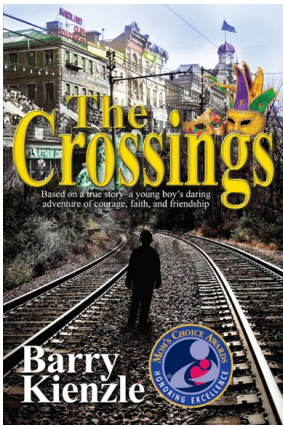
Don Then: Barry Kienzle's first novel a gentle story of a young boy's journey from pain to wisdom

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Reading a novel with feel-good vibes, nostalgic flourishes, and well-defined characters enlivens the soul. Throw in trains, the Depression, and a down-on-its-luck family fraught to succeed and the story evokes cordial echoes of a bygone era.

The Crossings, the first novel by local author Barry Kienzle, offers these morsels and more; it's a treat. Kienzle's gentle story is framed as the dream of an old man who has loved trains all his life. Quickly it morphs into a glimpse of yesteryear and is as American as apple pie, hot dogs, and cold soda pop on a hot summer's afternoon.

Despite Faulknerian-like paragraphs, *The Crossings* is an expressive tale about a lad's southbound adventure on a freight train. It is also a story about growing up and overcoming a father's abandonment, always a bitter pill to swallow.



The premise of *The Crossings* is charmingly simple: 12-year-old George Martin, a resident of Latonia, is a kid growing up in the Depression in the early 1930s. On the very day his father promises to take his son to a Reds' game at Crosley Field, he leaves George waiting on a porch and abandons his wife and daughter, too. As the days pass it becomes apparent, George's old man will never return.

Faced with heartache, the challenge of school, a boy's 'man-of-the-house' burden, and the need to make money in a Depression to help his mom, George contrives a sojourn to the Crescent City. Soon, he succumbs to his fascination with trains, his need for a carefree adventure, and the lure of Mardi Gras.

He possesses the guts and savvy to pull off such a trip, which he does capably. His road trip to New Orleans becomes a seminal event, as alluring as it is life defining. George is young but decisive. He hops a 5:15 p.m. freight out of the Latonia's Decoursey Train Yard and rides the rails to New Orleans for one very noteworthy adventure.

The reader gets the distinct impression that George is too naïve to consider failing. In the long run, his naiveté is the asset that helps him succeed. Along the way, our young hero fights off 'bulls' (railroad guards stalking free-loaders), street thugs, his share of scrapes, loss of money and food, and the lonely introspection that accompanies a bumpy boxcar ride. He meets a caring and pretty girl (hey, why not?), helpful hobos, and a kind-hearted nun. He finds work in New Orleans, eats beignets at Café du Monde, and learns a lesson or two from a compassionate old gent. He comes home much wiser. He is helped on his way north by a friendly conductor; however, for that aspect and a notable ending you must read Kienzle's book.

The Crossings offers sage advice, too. Here's an example from the man who befriends George in New Orleans:

"You can't let your father's actions define your life. As you get older you'll realize that. You need to fight past the hurt and the anger. People's lives are full of regret for many things that they do and things they don't do. We're all guilty of it. It's like we get trapped in places in our lives we don't like but can't figure a way to put them behind us. Or I should say, don't want to do what's necessary to put them behind us. So we keep doing the same dumb things that got us into those predicaments to begin with."

That is just a sample of a dozen or so wonderful passages.

Barry Kienzle was born, raised, and educated in Northern Kentucky. As he approaches retirement, he is considering a second career as a writer. *The Crossings* is based on trip taken by Keinzle's father in 1932. He, like young George Martin, hopped a freight train and rode it to New Orleans to attend Mardi Gras.

Visit Kienzle's website to learn more: <http://www.barrykbooks.com>



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