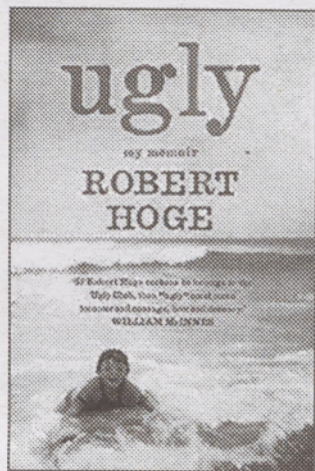


Robert Hoge writes of a beautiful life lived ugly



Book Review:
"Ugly: My
Memoir," by
Robert Hoge

BY SUSAN STORER CLARK
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

He was born ugly. How ugly was he? Maybe that sounds like the setup to a joke, but the punch line isn't funny.

He was so ugly his mother wanted to abandon him in the hospital. She said to his father, "Perhaps he'll die."

Robert Hoge writes that he was born with a huge lump on the front of his head, "...a massive bulge that jutted out from the top of my forehead and ran all the way down to the tip of where my nose should have been. It was almost twice the size of my newborn fist. It had formed early during my development and made a mess of my face, pushing my eyes to either side of my head. Like a fish."

More than that, both his legs were deformed. Only one of them extended to a knee, and both feet were malformed.

His parents left him in the hospital. "I was sent to the hospital's intensive care ward - ugly and alone."

He had his first operation when he was five days old, and the surgeon told his parents that the boy's brain was fine. Another surgeon said they could do a lot to fix him. While that was not exactly what his parents wanted to hear, they and their four children decided to bring their ugly baby home.

From that grim beginning, the book takes off into a spirited, interesting and funny account of Robert's childhood as an ugly kid. He spent a lot of time in the hospital, having dozens of operations to make his eyes function normally and his face look more normal. He grew up in Australia, which has government-paid health insurance, so the extensive medical care did not impoverish his working-class family. He writes that he was still ugly, and not just ordinary ugly, "A-grade, top-of-the-range ugly."

By the time he went to school, he also had artificial legs. Teasing and meanness were inevitable, and Hoge writes about some of the more dramatic incidents, but gradually, things began to change for him. The operations continued, and he gradually came to look less different, and some kids seemed not to notice or at least not to care. "I wasn't the most

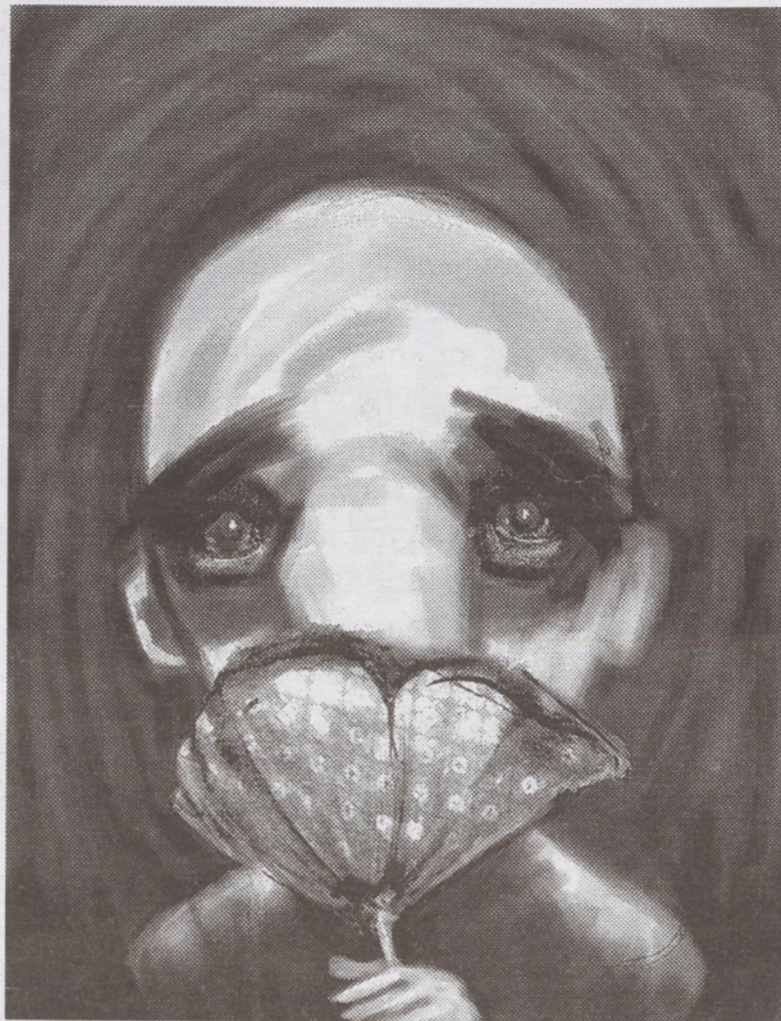


ILLUSTRATION BY LONESOME DAUGHTER

popular kid in school. I didn't have people rushing to spend every possible second with me at lunch. But I wasn't totally shunned and ignored either."

Still, he'd pick up a new cruel nickname every six months or so, and his reaction in the book is to rate and describe his top 10 nicknames by origin, originality, hurt factor, laugh factor and how he got over it. The worst were "cripple" and "toe-nose," the latter coming from the fact that surgeons had used cartilage from one of his amputated toes to build his nose. He writes that the last one still has the power to hurt. His favorite was "Transformer," after the robot toys that could change from humanoid into cars or planes, and referred to his artificial legs. He gives it a high rating for originality, and a low hurt factor.

Without making too big a deal of it, the courage Hoge describes is amazing. When he went to camp, and the boys in his cabin had to make a contribution to the camp talent show, he told them the only talent he had was doing handstands. They decided to go with it. So, when it came his turn to perform, he sat down on the stage and took off his artificial legs in

front of all the other kids. "Suddenly I was onstage with my legs off and dozens of kids staring at me... I planted my hands on the stage and pushed myself up." He held steady for a few seconds, and then walked on his hands across the stage. When he finished, there was a moment of stunned silence, and then everyone broke into applause and loud cheering. And his act was voted the best in the show. "We weren't showered with trophies or prize money, but we did each receive a chocolate bar, which was even better as far as I was concerned. Maybe taking my legs off wasn't that much of a big deal after all."

Still, it's not like the clouds parted and life was all sunshine after that, and the reader doesn't expect it. This book shows the everyday courage of Robert and his entire family, and the honesty and clarity with which his family dealt with him and the world's reaction to him. They knew his disability would keep him from most kinds of physical work, so they simply didn't accept bad grades. When he came home with a bad grade, his father would say, "Robert, you're not going to be digging ditches for a living. You've got to try harder." And he has.

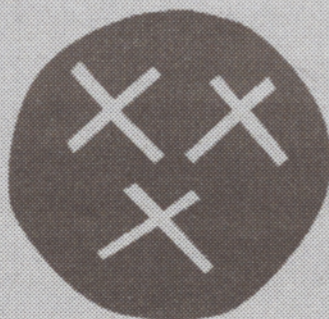
On the book's dust jacket, he's described as someone who's done pretty much every kind of writing there is. He's been a journalist, a speechwriter, a science writer and a political adviser. He's also written numerous articles published in Australia and overseas. Yes, he is married, and he and his wife have two daughters, and one of the things he enjoys is "talking with people about looking different and being disabled." And, yes, his face is still ugly.

His book is a quick and fairly easy read, "for ages 8 and up," and is published by the Penguin Young Readers Group. Some books written for young people have caught on with adults - after all, the "Hunger Games" series was written for young people. This is an inspiring read for anyone, and it's never, ever sappy.

When he writes near the end, "It was me, my legs, and my ugly face against the world," most people's money will be on Robert.

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