

Book Reviews

Stories from a 20th-Century Life

William R. Sears, Parabolic Press, Stanford, CA, 1994, 289 pp., \$ 22.00

I am reading Bill Sears' book of memoirs for the second time. Months ago I was a curious, avid reader; now I ponder what a reviewer should say. How often has anyone of us gone through books studied in the past and then revisited and reinterpreted them, books that open, automatically, at a page with a basic set of equations, or one of those proofs beginning with the words: "It is easy to show that. . .?" Unfortunately, what is customary in our technical work is seldom practiced with literature; that is a big mistake because the flaws and the beauties of a book can only be uncovered after a repeated perusal and an informal, almost casual random scanning of pages. Commonly, when a book is good one is left with a pleasant aftertaste, forgetful of all details; on further readings, each new approach has the flavor of an accidental encounter of two old friends who enjoy a good laugh over a glass of wine at some outdoor café.

Sears' book to me is just like that. Imagine leaving one of those flat, pompous, uninspired meetings of our times (I always thought of von Kármán sitting in the front row with his hearing aid switched off), where we are drained of our sense of humor and consequently of any common sense as well, and running into an old friend and teacher who invites us to supper and tells us interesting stories without equations, computer results, and slides.

The book flows well (no pun intended, even if Sears dedicated his life to fluid mechanics), but it is not necessarily hyperbolic: one can browse here and there, jump back and forth from one character to another, from one academic environment to another, always with pleasure. Every now and then, we partake of the excitement of new research and fruitful teaching; we see great and lesser people through Sears' eyes, with wit, understanding and, when necessary, honestly stern judgement. The author himself is refreshing, open and humane company; his love for music, his flair for flying and the ubiquitous presence of his wife, Mabel, and their love of a lifetime are evocative experiences to share.

Above all this, I would like to suggest that the book, behind its modest appearance as a collection of stories, is very important; so much so that I would recommend it as required reading (together with von Kármán's *The Wind and Beyond*) for all students of mechanical and aerospace engineering. Appropriately, Sears titled it "Stories from a 20th-Century Life", mindful that he started his technical career when aviation had just come out of its *Kinderkrankheiten* and was blossoming into the era of high-speed flow. That was an exciting time, full of research and discoveries, a brain-teaser for the experimentalist, the applied mathematician, the engineer; it was also a time when a limited number of extremely clever people could single themselves out of the multitude of practitioners. Now they deserve to be remembered as the founding fathers of our trade and as a rôle model for the new generations. Unfortunately, in the confusion produced by rapidly growing technology and the consumerism applied to scientific production, people tend to lose the sense of history and to underestimate the legacy of the pioneers. Youngsters do not even seem to know that there were pioneers, let aside their names. One day I mentioned the decade I spent with Toni Ferri to some graduate students and they said, "Tony Who?" We were at Brooklyn Poly, where Ferri had taught not many years ago. "Come on," said, I, "You never heard of him? he was so good that during the war they went to fish him out of Italy to start some new transonic project at NASA. It was von Kármán who suggested that." "And," they asked, "who was von Kármán?"

Sears' book helps bring back to life those marvelous men to keep us company with their wit, their imagination and their sometimes strange behavior, and moves us to learn more about them and to better understand how our beautiful brand of engineering was born.

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