

THE AICN NEWS FEATURE

“David is David”

A review of Paul and Judy Karasik’s new book about a sibling with autism, “The Ride Together “

The surrealism of “The Ride Together” is foreshadowed in the book’s dust jacket copy. It advances the fantastic premise that the Karasiks of Chevy Chase were: “your typical 1960’s family...”

It is a naïve statement. In truth, the nuclear clan that Joan and Monroe Karasik begat at the dawn of the Atomic Age was anything but typical. Dad was an up-and-coming, nouveau liberal, Washington, DC lawyer with good connections and a penchant for social reform. Mom was an emancipated alumna of the Capital’s fabled World War II “Government Girls”, the white-gloved sisters of Rosie the Riveter.

When Joan Pascal and Monroe Karasik married just after the War, they had every reason to anticipate a life of tony suburban privilege and good works. The ambitions and energies of both dictated that the couple would not languish in a leisurely life, but the hardships – such as they would be – would come by election, not appointment.

Any student of cliché (or the Kennedys) knows that youth, class, power, money and goodness present no impediments to misfortune. So, it is almost yawningly predictable that the good, young Karasiks would play host to uninvited unpleasantness. The dark visitor arrived with the birth of their first-born son, David, in 1948. David had, and has, autism.

Now, autism’s a funny thing – in both senses of the word. And, that’s what Judy and Paul Karasik’s unique and refreshing book is all about. “The Ride Together” is billed as “half memoir, half graphic novel”. Well, it’s not. In truth, it’s *all* memoir and the only thing novel about it is its format. The book tells the sad and funny and touching truth about autism’s intrusions upon normal family life. Chapters alternate between Judy’s well-crafted prose and Paul’s equally expert cartooning. (These finely honed skills are, after all, what the authors employ to make a living).

While this innovative construction builds a highly interesting and entertaining framework, it’s not ultimately what makes the book worthy of broad readership. It’s the (surrealistic) content, stupid!

In the first chapter Judy recalls a family reunion. It’s a Karasik-styled event, y’see, which means it’s staged a bit differently than the gathering of the clan at your Aunt Edith’s in Muncie. The Karasiks, sans the late Monroe, gather on the tall roof of their three-story home. It’s a scene from an upscale version of “Third Rock From the Sun”, for pity’s sake! And that, right there, signals what’s so mesmerizing about “The Ride Together”. It’s an unusually told story of an unconsciously atypical family that is, in some ways, above it all



Paul recounts a childhood “day in the life” in his aptly entitled chapter: “Bizarro World”.

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“David is David” (cont’d from previous page)

(“I piled the used evening gowns in the dress-up chest...”), yet is grounded by their *really* atypical loved one. It’s a story of fraternal and sororal love, concern, horror and fascination. And, David himself is a darned interesting fellow. Astute and articulate, he’s a current affairs junkie who enjoys – or is inwardly prevailed upon – to don a business suit and enact “Meet The Press” interviews in the living room. It’s as if his life is a theatrical production of a script based on his parents’ political and intellectual involvements. Perfect!

The Ride Together could have been a run-of-the-literary gristmill, Reader’s Digest tearjerker about the heartbreaks of a family dealing with disabilities (usually authored by smilin’-through-the-tears parents). As such, it would have been fine enough but appealing to a limited readership (and, in this case, viewership). What breaks the parochial barrier is not just the interesting structure of the book, but its unsentimental honesty shrouded in deep love. In engaging words and pictures Judy and Paul tell not just of heart wrench and worry, but of the anger, frustration, indignity, and bewilderment David imposes upon their lives. Yet, through it all, they really love the alien visitor who is their brother!

In the end, what makes this book stand apart and marks it for success isn’t the message that, as Paul says, “David is David”, but that, despite that, Judy is Judy and Paul is Paul. And they, as atypical as their genes and journey may be, are really just like the rest of us.

-Craig Roberts

Excerpt from “The Ride Together”

She turned her attention to me and said, in a matter-of-fact way, "Well, Judy, David gets some things easier because a lot of ordinary things are harder for him. Getting through the day is harder for David than it is for the rest of us."

"Hard?" I replied. His life didn't look so hard to me. "Mommy!" My mother paused before answering.

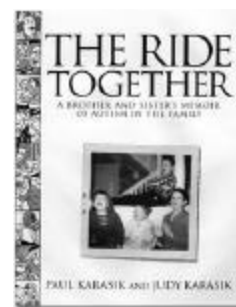
"You know the way you look at something, Judy, and it's just there? Or the way you hear something, and it's just a sound?"

"What David sees or hears breaks into a lot of little pieces before it gets to him. So he needs to put it all back together. This goes on all the time, and it's a lot of work. The parts of his brain are the same, it's the way they're connected that's different."

I stopped arguing. There were times when I could almost see the gears in David's head spinning, as he said the same things quickly over and over, his hands dancing in the air, sometimes drumming on his head. No wonder.

"Things arrive splintered," said my mother.

She was about to continue but I interrupted.
"OK Mom, I get it."



Paul and Judy Karasik

“The Ride Together – a Brother and Sister’s Memoir of Autism in the Family” will be published in January 2003 by the Washington Square Press. Excerpts, reviews, and much more information about the book and its authors can be found at www.theridetgether.com. Judy and Paul Karasik will be meeting fans, reading from their book, and signing copies at the Politics and Prose Bookstore and Coffeehouse, 5015 Connecticut Avenue, N.W. in Washington on January 28th. Joan Karasik – who with her late husband Monroe inspired establishment of the Karasik Child Care Centers in Silver Spring and Gaithersburg, Maryland – continues her tireless work on behalf of developmentally disabled persons. She was last seen trotting briskly into a rally on behalf of renewing The Governor’s Waiting List Initiative.

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