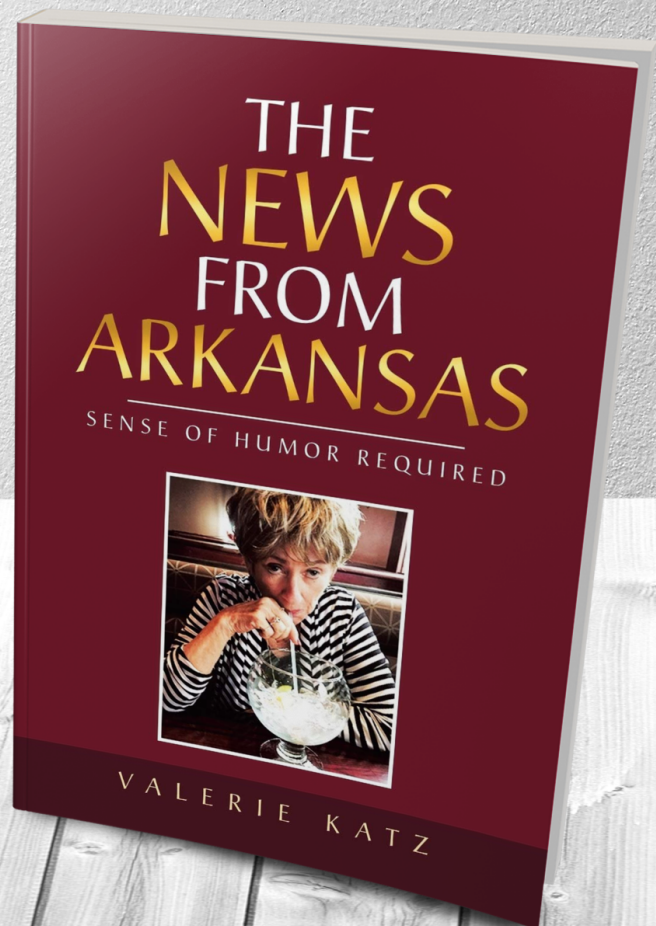
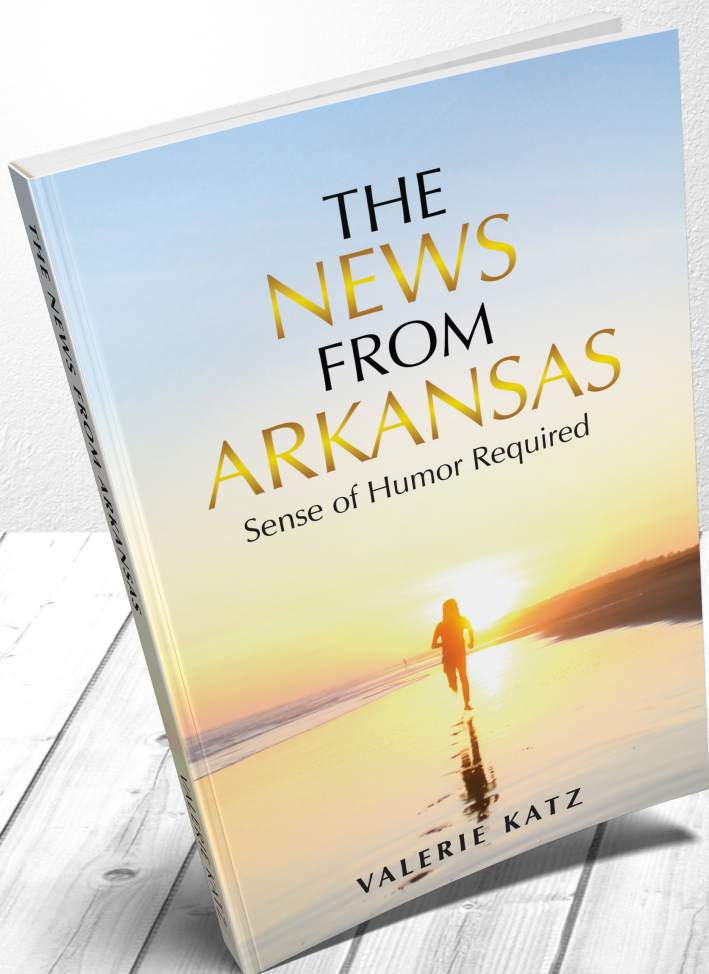


Reviewed by: Jonah Meyer

YOUR BOOK REVIEW

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AUTHOR: VALERIE KATZ

THE NEWS FROM ARKANSAS: SENSE OF HUMOR REQUIRED



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REVIEW

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"I wore my Tinkerbell PJs, and David was in his underwear and socks. He hooked up the VHS, and we watched Law and Order. Good times!"

A self-described "California girl" whose home had always been the Golden State well into her sixties, Katz and her then-boyfriend David found themselves, surprisingly, relocating to Arkansas, much to the confusion and amusement of her four children and six grandchildren. So how did the couple end up down south in the Natural State? It all started, hilariously, with an advertisement from the actor Eric Estrada on television, touting the advantages of retiring to Arkansas. That which began as emails sent to friends and family to keep them abreast of "all the strange and amusing differences in our new world" in their move to a completely different region of the country, over time morphed into group email "News" updates. Eventually, at the request of many of those friends and family who were regular receivers of the "News," the entire set of adventures were encapsulated into the book at hand.

Right out of a storybook romance, Valerie and David met at a country-western bar during a group dance lesson. Katz wanted specifically to learn the West Coast swing, and it was a bit later that she found herself again dancing in the arms of David, a dance teacher, who just so happened to be offering lessons on that particular style. It turns out that in 2007 when the two had been dating for a little while, the couple decided to take Eric Estrada up on his offer to visit beautiful Arkansas for a weekend. Next thing you know, the two decided that was where they were to spend the next chapter of their lives together. At a bar in their new state, Katz asked a couple they had befriended, "Where is Arkansas? Where are we?" Thus came the response: "About halfway across the country and a little bit south." Katz admits that at that point she was convinced their rather erratic decision was the right one, and she had fallen in love with their new Bella Vista Village.

This memoir's author has a certain knack for excellent, relatable storytelling, and much of the humor involved in the telling of the narrative is born from the often-entertaining cultural differences the Katzs encountered in their new home state. It was in many ways a different way of life and, definitely, a change in weather, with much snow and ice in the wintertime; and yet they fit right in, making friends with other Arkansas couples and still very much being involved with the local dinner and dance club scene. David, in fact, had an entire floor fashioned as a dance studio in their new home, so that he could continue doing that which he loved the most: offering dance lessons.

While the book is, as its subtitle suggests, very often humorous in the situations and adventures the couple found themselves in, there is also a sadness to their story. David was diagnosed with cancer, which started as a tumor in his bladder and eventually metastasized to other areas of his body, and much of the "News" Valerie shares with loved ones (and by extension, the readers of this book) centers around the challenging and painful experiences her husband went through in his lengthy effort to beat back the disease. Ultimately, it took his life. And at that point in the book, because the reader has come to know the couple so intimately, the news is indeed devastating.

The entire read is written in the form of diary entries in that the book is basically a large collection of "News from Arkansas" email blasts sent by Katz to her family members and friends back home in California as a way of staying in touch. This is a rather novel way of going about writing what was to become an autobiography, and the truth is that Katz makes it work remarkably well. A true pleasure to read, the book's new and often quirky ventures are around every corner (and every other page). The author deftly employs her own sense of humor, which proves contagious to the reader. Readers should be prepared to laugh and, at times, cry as this slice-of-life memoir takes them from sunny California to "southern" Arkansas as well as to the many other places in America which Katz embarks on with her new boyfriend, Bob, after David's death. In addition, there are also the journeys overseas the author takes with her girlfriends and varying family members over the years. Throughout it all is a healthy, positive outlook on life, emphasizing both a strong sense of the joy of experiencing new things and places and, of course, the significance of humor.