

# DRAWING STRAWS

By George Gilbert Pogue

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## Book Review

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*Drawing Straws*, by first-time novelist George Pogue, is one of those “coming of age” books which can be read and enjoyed at several levels.

At the base level is the somewhat autobiographical tale of a ten-year-old boy who is moving toward his teenage years. Set in the early 1960s, the story is replete with all the boyhood pranks and occasional emotional trauma that typically accompany such growth.

One theme is Newton Carriger’s innocent but intense love for Cindy, the All-American girl-next-door. Paralleling that theme is that Newton, the central character, is the key figure in resolving the brutal murder of a black man in a rural southwest Missouri community. Newton’s ongoing search for resolution to that murder is, in large part, a key to his becoming a young man.

At a second level, the story is a serious social commentary—not always positive—about the insular and unsophisticated lives of rural people who gloss over the murder of a transient black man because he was “...not one of their own.” Though not corrupt in the usual sense of the word, the law enforcement community just plain ignored investigating why a hobo died violently, even when all the evidence pointed to a homicide.

And at a third level, the book lets the central character, his family and his boyhood friends examine the social and philosophical trends of the latter part of the turbulent 1960s—the time of hippies and Woodstock, Vietnam War protests, and the unstoppable shift toward financial and technological change which ultimately would influence the world.

Careful readers will note that author Pogue undoubtedly was influenced by another Missouri writer, Samuel Clemens—more commonly known as Mark Twain, the renowned author of what some have called the “...best American novel ever written”, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Twain often put his characters on a raft on the Mississippi; Pogue sometimes put his in a leaky Jon boat and later a canoe on the Elk River. Observant readers also will find hints of Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, especially in the courtroom scenes. Both are excellent writers from whom any author can learn.

Young readers will enjoy following Newton as he and his friends try to find the reasons for the death of the black man the young boy had befriended. Older readers will appreciate the social commentary, often in dialogue between characters, which reveals the radical political and economic changes occurring throughout the country.

The episodic format of the story, with each chapter revealing a bit more about Newton and his progress toward self-awareness, is at times somewhat uneven. Some chapters tend to be a bit didactic—"preachy," but Pogue has created some memorable characters and scenes in his first novel.