

# Everyday Life: How the Ordinary Became Extraordinary

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mates through social customs of the era, such as corn-picking contests, country dances, and church events. We see men who had choices for off-farm work, such as his own father's work in the aviation industry. Tradition and family necessity forced Jack's father to return to the farm, setting the stage for Jack's perception of his life choices. He writes, "In the end, I live here because I love here. It is too easy . . . to be a simple eulogist, the regionally bereaved" (5).

In part three, Jack considers his grandparents, who graduated from high school in 1935. He unpacks the easy myth that limited choices mean quicker decisions. He regards his grandmother's suitors as if he is the parent greeting these young men at the farm lane gate, weighing whether they are worth the young lady's time. He presents his relatives not as exceptional but as typical. He shows the nuance in farm families in which the men are competent but the women broadly capable and, in his view, the "Wonder Women," as one essay is titled.

Within families, adherence to gender roles can exclude and even inhibit storytelling. After Jack's grandmother's death, female relatives took charge of her home and its contents, disposing of items they felt she would not want anyone to see. He protested. He wanted to know his grandmother as a full person. Historians, however, work with incomplete artifacts to find patterns in the knowable past. Readers treated to Jack's gifts as a storyteller will appreciate the quilt he has constructed from his own narrative, sewn into coherence with fabric from the past.

*Everyday Life: How the Ordinary Became Extraordinary*, by Joseph A. Amato. London: Reaktion Books, 2016. 256 pp. Notes, index. \$25.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Tom Morain is a former administrator of the State Historical Society of Iowa and recently semiretired Director of Government Relations at Grace-land University. He is the author of *Prairie Grass Roots: An Iowa Small Town in the Early Twentieth Century* (1988).

Joseph Amato has written a thoughtful, theoretical approach to the study of everyday history. "Everyday history" needs explanation to avoid two possibilities for misunderstanding. In this context, "everyday" is by no means to be confused with the mundane or insignificant. It has more to do with daily activity and how daily activities have evolved over time. Second, Amato specifically differentiates everyday history from the broader social science approaches of social and cultural history. While the latter describe how particular groups respond to events or situations, everyday history focuses on individuals and how they interpret their environment through the lens of their unique culture. "Daily life," Amato writes, "receives its definition around what first

arises in mind – what surfaces, notion, forms, colours and flesh present and insist upon reaction” (79).

With this perspective, Amato fashions the “ordinary” and “extraordinary” in the title. The former, I take it, focuses primarily on material culture, the things that surround a particular individual. The “extraordinary” is the unique way people give meaning to their surroundings. In that process, individuals are unique (extraordinary) and not just a part of a group to which the social, economic, or political historian might want to ascribe them. Amato recognizes the challenge of such an approach and its inherent internal tension, “the abiding paradox of seeking to research and represent the singular and unique, on the one hand, while relying on the framing powers of generalizations and overarching narrative” (197).

In the first part of the book, Amato provides a summary view of the evolution of European social life from the Middle Ages to the present, with particular attention to rural life. He does, however, pay attention to many different levels of society, from peasant to noble. Unfortunately, while the book preaches its devotion to the ultimate uniqueness of the individual, it very rarely provides an example of such an individual or illustrates the discipline of everyday history in action.

Amato’s major focus begins with the 1800s in Europe with the impact of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. His scope expands to include the American experience as he illustrates three major themes that have radically altered daily life: the movement from rural to urban as the city has become the locus of change and the magnet for population growth; the explosion of things in our lives that industry, science, and technology have produced; and the inability of rural culture to protect itself from the invasion of urban values, resulting in the destruction of stable and self-sustaining rural culture. It is clear that, while he views the last trend as immutable, he harbors an affection for the sense of community and cultural texture that the small town provided.

In a departure from the historical norm, Amato’s final chapter invokes the poet along with the historian as co-interpreter of the “extraordinary.” The historian must have the transcendentalist poet’s eye and ear for meaning encapsulated in a common object or daily routine to capture the “irreducibility of the singular and the elusiveness of the ephemeral” (206).

Amato’s book is not an easy read. Nor is this text – a theory for the writing of everyday history – likely to become a bestseller. Those willing to drink deeply from his narrative, however, may develop new perspectives on the historian’s craft and vision.