Discussion Guide
Summary

A witty, tender memoir of a son’s journey home to care for his irascible mother—a tale of secrets, silences, and enduring love

In the Northeast part of Missouri, where the big rivers run, angels are prayed for, and Wal-Martians battle for bargains, there is a little town called Paris where you can find George and Betty—lifelong allies, conspirators, sharers of jokes and grudges, occasional warriors, mother and son.

Beneath the comic banter they share lies undying love, loyalty, and occasionally the desire to throttle each other. They have been through it all. Now they are facing…a little more. The juncture that every son or daughter understands, that reversal of roles that rarely goes smoothly as parent grows older and child struggles, heart in hand, to hold on to what once was.

George—“fiftysomething-ish,” bruised from big-time Manhattan where he has lost his job—has returned to Missouri for Betty’s ninety-first birthday at the height of the hottest summer in years. The roses in the yard are in danger. As is Betty. The mother George remembers as the beautiful blonde, flooring the accelerator of the family’s battered Impala, has lost her driver’s license. Suddenly this ever-independent woman—killer bee at the bridge table, perfectionist at the piano—actually needs the help she would rather die than ask for.

Despite his doubts (“I am a care inflictor…I am the Joan Crawford of eldercare”) and near-lethal cooking skills, George tries to take over, stirring up and burning tuna casseroles made with potato chips, mounting epic expeditions for comfortable but stylish shoes, coming to understand the battle his determined mother is waging against a world determined to overlook the no longer young. The question underlying everything? Will George lure Betty into assisted living? When hell freezes over. He can’t bear to force her from the home they both treasure where the trees his father planted shelter Betty on her shaky trips around the yard.

But, along with camaraderie and these hard new concerns, this time they share triggers memories and sometimes old regrets. Despite their closeness, there is so much that this mother and son have never spoken of and now this seems to matter, maybe more than ever. Betty, who speaks her mind but cannot always reveal her heart, has never really accepted the fact that her son is gay. George has never outgrown the feeling that he has disappointed her. For so long, these two people—united but still silent about too many things—have struggled with words. They will never not be people who lead different kinds of lives. But they try their best to make things right. Betty sees her son’s sadness and tries to reach out. George is inspired by his mother’s unfailing bravery. As they redefine the home they find themselves sharing once more, a new chapter of their story is written. As they pass through George and Betty’s bittersweet hours and days, readers will find themselves moved by two imperfect but extraordinary people and what is finally the most human of stories, a tale of caring and kindness sparked by humor and touched by grace.

From http://georgehodgman.com/books/bettyville-tr
Questions and Topics for Discussion

Westport Reads 2016: Discussion of Bettyville

The theme of Westport Reads this year is: Identity.

1. How do you identify yourself? How do you think other people perceive you?

2. Are there characteristics that were once part of your identity, but that no longer are? What caused your identity to change?

3. George was uncomfortable as a child because he didn’t feel that he “fit in”. How do you think he would have described his own identity before moving to NY?

4. When he was in college, he was able to acknowledge and act on the fact that he was gay. Yet he cringed when his roommate announced to everyone that they were lovers. How do you think it affects someone to have to hide a basic part of his identity much of the time? Think about Jews and blacks “passing”, as well as LGBT individuals.

5. Despite not acknowledging his sexual identity to those not close to him, George was active in the AIDS movement and comforted friends and friends of friends with the disease. He was also able to sense others who were not acknowledging that they were gay. (The man from Washington he was attracted to who had a finance and later had AIDS.) Do you think that is typical of people hiding a part of their identity, or do you think George’s kindheartedness accounts for his attitude towards those with AIDS?

6. How did not being able to discuss his identity with his parents affect him? How about knowing that his parents did not approve of his lifestyle?

7. George was an extremely kind person and a loving son. Do you think these characteristics were overlooked by him and his parents because of the “elephant in the room” of his sexuality?

8. When “Vanity Fair” fired him, and he was no longer being paid as a journalist, George’s self-esteem as a writer was undermined. What effects can others denying a part of one’s identity have on a person?

9. What was Betty’s identity? How did George support her concept of herself?
10. How did George react to Betty’s reluctant admission that she and his father never discussed the fact that he was gay? They never considered trying to help him deal with his rejection by the people in town. The Hodgmans didn’t discuss feelings at all. Are there things like this that it is better not to talk about with your children?
Additional Discussion Questions

1. Where, or what, is “Bettyville?” Describe your equivalent of Bettyville.

2. “The highway between Madison and Moberly will always be one of the places where I will see my mother, hair wrapped in rollers under a scarf, wearing a pair of sunglasses, taking me off into the big wide world.” Why do you think this image resonated so much with George? Do you have a favorite memory of your parents from childhood?

3. Have you ever assumed the role of caregiver for someone in your life? How did your experience compare to George’s? Should he have coerced Betty into assisted living? Why or why not?

4. Why do you think George decided to stay in Paris? What would you have done?

5. What lessons does George learn while taking care of Betty? Does Betty learn any lessons as well?

6. How does George’s relationship with his parents change throughout his life?

7. “By the time my mother realized that she was smart or saw she had the kind of looks that open doors, she had already closed too many to go back.” How do you think this affected Betty’s disposition? Do you think a lot of women of her generation shared this experience?

8. Betty once took care of her own mother after she broke her hip: “I do not know if Betty’s sorrow stemmed from her mother’s loss of independence or her own.” How do you think Betty’s earlier training as a caregiver might affect her feelings now that she is the care-receiver?

9. How does our sense of “home” change with time, as we leave the place we are born? What does it feel like to return?

10. “If I were starting a Betty Museum, I would make an exhibit out of the sandals with their worn, thin straps and soles indented with my mother’s dark footprints.” What exhibits would be in your parents’ museum?

11. George describes how his hometown is “vanishing,” with small businesses boarded up to make way for big box stores. How has your town changed over the years? Are we better or worse for these changes? What is lost or gained?

From the publisher (http://www.penguin.com/read/book-clubs/bettyville/9780143107880)
Book Reviews

Editor's choice: 'Bettyville' by George Hodgman


Paris, Mo., population 1,246 and falling: This is the hometown to which George Hodgman returned for his mother Betty's 91st birthday. Two weeks stretched into two months. He thinks about leaving but cannot bring himself to get a flight back to New York.

Hodgman does not make himself seem heroic. "I'm not a martyr," he writes in his new memoir, "Bettyville." "I'm just available, an unemployed editor relegated to working freelance." As he puts it, he stays there, in the house with dusty antiques and dying rosebushes, to become his mother's "care inflictor."

Be not afraid that "Bettyville" is a story about elder care, because Betty Baker Hodgman would never stand for it. Even with dementia and lymphoma, Betty is very much full of life and never tries to be anyone but herself. 

"At least I'm out and out with my meanness," she tells her son. "I'm not a sneak. I hate a sneak."

Betty isn't really mean, just direct and quick-witted — even if she struggles for words. A real tenderness runs through this poignant memoir, and its comedic qualities and sharp insights prevent it from becoming sappy. (The man at the IGA told George that his mother, "Came in here one day and said she could get fresher produce at an antique store.")

After Betty loses her driver's license — she drove into a ditch — she likes taking to the road with her son, although outings to places like "Waikiki Coiffures" can be an ordeal. "When dealing with older women," writes Hodgman, "a trip to a hairdresser and two Bloody Marys goes further than any prescription drug."

Hodgman has a way of seeing the absurdity of it all. When the lacquered bubble from "Waikiki Coiffures" isn't entirely successful, a downcast Betty claims this is her worst yet, but he notes that she has not had what she considers "a successful hair appointment since around 1945."

While Betty once shooed her son off, she now wants him close. He looks in her face and understands her anguish, aware that she is barely holding on and becoming more anxious, sometimes even terrified. The little things bother her — the misplaced address book, the uncooperative TV remote control or can opener, lost words. "Don't leave me," she says if he goes to bed before she does. Betty and Hodgman's father, who died in 1997, never fully and explicitly accepted that their son was gay.

Betty may be afraid, but she will not speak of her fears. "She keeps her secrets," Hodgman writes. "I keep mine. That is our way. We have always struggled with words." Hodgman renders Betty fully — and on this journey home, learns that he is strong enough to stay the course with her in Paris.
PARIS, Mo. — The man sitting alone in a row of chairs in the baggage claim area was sleeping. He had turned himself sideways so that in his bulky black down jacket, he seemed a ball. His face was pale and pudgy, and his jeans needed hitching up.

I was afraid he’d wake up and catch me looking at him, see my dismay.

We had arranged to meet here, in the St. Louis airport, once my plane landed. I wasn’t even sure it was him.

Once, George Hodgman was slim and jittery with a big, sardonic laugh. He was openly gay but perhaps closed as a person, I thought.

I knew him in the mid-1990s, when he was my editor at Vanity Fair. Later, when he returned to book editing, his first love, we fell out of touch.

Until he called this last summer, I didn’t know that he had lost his last publishing job, in 2011, and had gone back to live in his childhood home in Paris, Mo., and to look after his 92-year-old mother, Betty.

It certainly sounded depressing. A single, unemployed and now chubby middle-aged man goes to live with his widowed mother in a dying Plains town. You couldn’t blame me for wanting to take the next plane back to New York. I checked my messages and then approached the sleeping bundle.

“George?”

He sputtered awake, the familiar wild glow in his eyes. “Oh, there you are,” he said rosily, tugging his pants as he jumped up.

The reason for my trip was that Mr. Hodgman had written a book, a most remarkable, laugh-out-loud book called “Bettyville,” from Viking. Rarely has the subject of elder care produced such droll human comedy, or a heroine quite on the mettlesome order of Betty Baker Hodgman.

For as much as the book works on several levels (as a meditation on belonging, as a story of growing up gay and the psychic cost of silence, as metaphor for recovery), it is the strong-willed Betty who shines through. She may be trapped in midstage dementia, but her stout sense of self never wavers.

And in coming home, Mr. Hodgman confronts the question that has haunted him: why his parents could never bring themselves to talk about his personal life.

In a scene from the book, Betty, sitting on the couch in the Hodgmans’ family room in Paris, asks her only child:

“‘Is there anything I can do for you, George?’

‘See me,’ I start to say. I don’t know where the words have come from, and I stop before I utter them because I know it is too late anyway, too late for her to know all of me. I didn’t discuss my sexuality with her until I was 40. She didn’t ask. My father hadn’t asked. We were all afraid.”

That Mr. Hodgman loves his mother and father (known as Big George, he died in 1997) is never in doubt. And what would seem to put mother and son on separate planets — her small-town, no-nonsense manner, his big-city irony — actually makes them feel congruent, like Harold and Maude.

But the great surprise is how closely he was observing his parents, despite the distances, and indeed other relatives and characters living in that part of Missouri.

Viking has planned a multicity book tour for Mr. Hodgman, rare for a first-time author (he will be at Barnes & Noble, on Broadway at 82nd Street, on March 10), and both Amazon and the Books-a-Million chain have selected “Bettyville” as a top pick.
There has been a spike in the memoir genre recently, with writers lifting the veil on their eccentric families (Jeannette Walls’s “The Glass Castle”) or confronting the loopy reality of caring for an aging parent or one who has Alzheimer’s (Elinor Fuchs’s “Making an Exit,” Roz Chast’s “Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?”).

Mr. Hodgman approaches it from a fairly new perspective: that of a gay son. Or, as he characterized the difference during our conversation: “Here was this neurotic, self-centered, New York, childless gay man.”

He was being somewhat glib, though. Sara Bershtel, the publisher of Metropolitan Books, who worked with Mr. Hodgman at Henry Holt from 2001 to 2007, and remains a close friend, points out that “Bettyville” evokes “the development of a watchful gay kid.”

She said, “You have to watch everybody, you have to watch your parents, and you can’t show anything.” That severely limits what you can express, like the uncomfortable sense that Mr. Hodgman felt growing up or the schoolyard taunts. But it also made him a shrewd and witty observer.

Recalling a moment when he takes Betty to a local Amish store to buy pies (a hazard, clearly, of living in the Midwest), Mr. Hodgman writes about a group of little girls in aprons marching toward the shop, carrying dishes covered in white cloths:

“One girl lags behind. Her bonnet is untied and the strings hang down her chest. Her cheeks are dirty and her boots appear to be unlaced. She stomps angrily down the path, oblivious to the rest. She looks angry; I sense rebellion. Enough with the churning: This one may just be heading off the reservation.”

Carole de Santi, who is Mr. Hodgman’s editor at Viking, said that while there are many memoirs on the elderly, few capture the sensibilities of a younger baby boomer, which, in Mr. Hodgman’s case, incorporate his experiences in New York during the AIDS crisis and his work-centered life, at Vanity Fair and later Holt, that gradually left him feeling empty.

He also recounts a stay in rehab for drug abuse. Ultimately, though, Ms. de Santi said she bought the book for its voice — “completely his own.”

Even those who know Mr. Hodgman’s skills as an editor, like Ms. Bershtel, were struck by its reach, saying she admired “his ability to render Betty as fully herself rather than as a projection of his own ideas.”

Leaving St. Louis, we set out in Mr. Hodgman’s old Lincoln for Paris, a nearly three-hour drive in the direction of Nebraska. It will give us time to discuss “Bettyville” and the impulse that led him to write it.

He began thinking about a book that first summer home, when his mother’s health issues were still being determined and he was in doubt himself. Would she go to an assisted living center? Would he get a regular job again? Despite some memory loss, Betty could still command and entertain with a sharp line.

“My mother is funny and dry without knowing that she is,” he said. “Together, we can make people laugh. So I had this idea of a quirky comedy team.”

In the car, Mr. Hodgman opened a window and lit a cigarette. Outside the earth was flat, gray, silent. “I’m also very nostalgic about these towns,” he said.

The Hodgmans lived between Paris and nearby Madison, a town of 528 people, where Big George, the son of a St. Louis lawyer, ran the Baker family lumberyard. It’s long gone. Like many towns across the Midwest, these two have witnessed their share of loss. Drugs have been devastating.

The frame house in Madison where Mr. Hodgman’s grandmother, Mammy Baker, once lived, raising vegetables and chickens, became a meth lab and later the scene of a homicide.

“I’ve tried for years to get reporters to come here — Kate Boo, Anthony Shadid,” said Mr. Hodgman, who edited two books by Mr. Shadid, who was a foreign correspondent for The New York Times before his death in 2012. “I just felt that this rural area was a real story that nobody was telling.”
Mr. Hodgman said he usually wrote from 4 to 9 a.m., when his mother got up. But there were also times during the day when, sitting at his laptop in the family room, he would take down a conversation while his mother was moored to her place on the sofa. This arrangement mainly served to placate her; if he left the room, she’d demand to know where he was.

And for someone who had lost his job, and his bearings, the book was its own kind of salvation. Although Mr. Hodgman has had many relationships, he is essentially solitary, he said; and, like many New Yorkers, he was attached to his job and at the same time questioning his choices.

“He did seem disaffected, tired out with the publishing game, and where he fit it,” Ms. de Santi said. In 2011, Mr. Hodgman lost his job at Houghton Mifflin in a restructuring of his department.

As much as Betty needed him, and though he quickly found work as a freelance editor, there was nevertheless a sense that he had gone back to Missouri with his tail between his legs.

“My mother is many things but she always wanted me to be successful,” he said. “And I wasn’t feeling at all successful.” He gave a snort of laughter. “She didn’t really help that. ‘When you were fired …’ ‘When you were fired …’ ”

We had reached the Hodgman home, a modest ranch house on a corner lot planted with care by Big George. Inside, we were greeted by Raj, Mr. Hodgman’s gangly black Lab, and by his cousin, Lucinda Baker, who had come from Columbia to stay with Betty.

Then he introduced me to his mother. She is still a strikingly handsome woman, with a chic, highlighted bob and a warm if distant gaze. Getting his mother a cut and blowout that will satisfy her is one of their regular battles. As he wrote in the book, “When dealing with older women, a trip to a hairdresser and two Bloody Marys goes further than any prescription drug.”

Betty settled onto the couch and picked up her book, a biography of TV anchorwomen. An indifferent reader most of her life, she now reads in an obsessive flow, typically rereading a book five times and asking her son at least 20 times a day for help in recalling a name. But he believes this belated interest keeps her stimulated.

As he chatted with his cousin and Carol Crigler, a local farmwoman who is his main helper, I glanced around the small room.

In the corner, wedged between the couch and a picture window, was a sagging recliner and in front of it, a card table. If Mr. Hodgman’s memoir was a personal achievement, a chance to rectify loss and failure, and to dwell for a little while longer in the world of his mother, in Bettyville, then it was also a victory over circumstances. He had written the book at the card table.

Later, he said: “Part of being here is my need as well as hers. I know that.”

He also accepts that the book’s intimate focus on their lives — and on his New York life — may not be anything his mother (or friends in conservative Paris) cares to contemplate. Still, he is hoping to find ways to share the book with her.

More than that, though, he has understood this fierce, embattled woman. That may be the irony of ironies: He yearned for his parents to see him in full — and he accepts that they could not — but in setting down his mother’s life, he has brought immeasurable understanding to it.

Which may serve as a guide to others. As Ms. Bershtel said, “Betty will never know but we will.” He certainly has no regrets about the choices he made. “My mother hasn’t been lonely,” he said, adding: “I am happier in this situation than I would be in an empty apartment.” He wants to write another book, and to keep the home in Paris after his mother is gone.

When I observe the truism that a parent’s death is his or her last gift to a child, removing the yoke of fear and expectation, Mr. Hodgman nodded. He reflected a moment and then said: “I am a believer in God in my own special way. But I think I was given this book because I came back.”

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/fashion/after-a-homecoming-a-son-finds-his-muse.html?_r=0
BETTYVILLE A Memoir by George Hodgman  
KIRKUS REVIEW Review Posted Online: Nov. 29th, 2014  

A gay magazine editor and writer’s account of how he returned home to the Midwest from New York to care for his aging mother.

Hodgman never dreamed he would return home to Paris, Missouri, to become his 90-year-old mother Betty’s “care inflictor.” But the lonely life he led in New York City, “lingering between the white spaces of copy, trying to get the work perfect,” had soured; more than that, he was now unemployed. And Betty, who refused to enter an assisted living facility, could not continue living alone. Hodgman watched his mother confront her increasing confusion and physical fragility with dread. Inevitably, they bickered and fussed, but the author knew that Betty represented the home he was never able to establish for himself, just as Betty knew her son was her only steady source of support. Confronted on a daily basis with reminders of his past, Hodgman reviewed his life with both parents. Betty and his father could never quite accept that he was gay, and they were content with their lives and the simplicity of Paris. It was the author who was never happy with who he was and who felt a perpetual need to make up for being different by trying to do better. That struggle would lead him to a high-status, high-pressure job at Vanity Fair. But at what should have been the pinnacle of his career, he gave his life over to drugs and the Fire Island gay party scene. Hodgman’s recovery—not just from substance abuse, but also from old patterns of emotional disconnection—would take years. But when he returned to Paris, it was with a greater acceptance of who he was: not the son Betty might have wanted or expected, but the son who would see her through the “strange days” of her final years of life.

Movingly honest, at times droll, and ultimately poignant.
George Hodgman had defined himself by his work as an editor in New York City. Newly out of a job, he returns home to small-town Paris, Missouri, and discovers that his mother, Betty, is in need of full-time care. Their affection and shared humor dance around the unspoken; Hodgman is gay, a fact his parents never acknowledged.

In Bettyville, Hodgman writes with wit and empathy about all the loss he's confronted with. Betty's poor health is mirrored by the failure of towns like Paris, whose farms and lumberyards are now Walmarts and meth labs. Coming out in the age of AIDS, he lost the people he was close to when he had nowhere else to turn. His commitment to "see someone through. All the way home," is medicine for his own soul as much as his mother's.

That doesn't mean Bettyville is without humor--far from it. Paris eccentrics (one woman shampoos her hair in the soda fountain) compete with Hodgman's colleagues in the office of Vanity Fair. The stresses of eldercare take their toll as well: "Monitored by graph, my emotions would resemble a chart of a frenetic third world economy."

This is a portrait of a woman in decline, but still very much alive and committed to getting the lion's share of mini-Snickers at every opportunity. When things are left unsaid between parents and children, it leaves a hurt that can never be completely repaired, but love and dedication can make those scarred places into works of art. Bettyville is one such masterpiece.

Seggel, Heather
ABOUT GEORGE HODGMAN

George Hodgman is a veteran magazine and book editor who has worked at Simon & Schuster, Vanity Fair, and Talk magazine. His writing has appeared in Entertainment Weekly, Interview, W, and Harper's Bazaar, among other publications. He lives in New York City and Paris, Missouri.

George Hodgman

Born: Missouri, United States
Nationality: American
Occupation: Memoirist
Contemporary Authors Online. Detroit: Gale, 2016. From Literature Resource Center.
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WORKS:

WRITINGS:


Sidelights

George Hodgman’s mother, Betty, lived alone in her rural Paris, Missouri, home well into her nineties, but by then she had begun to show signs of dementia. George, who had been working as a freelance editor in New York City after leaving an editorial job at Vanity Fair, moved back to Missouri to live with her and take care of her. He details his experiences in Bettyville: A Memoir, relating the lonely and emotional toll of caregiving. Hodgman helped his mother dress, cook, and eat, all while navigating everything that remained unresolved between them. Hodgman came of age as a gay man at the height of the AIDS crisis, but neither of his parents had accepted or acknowledged his sexual orientation. Hodgman writes about the distance this created with his parents, his subsequent substance abuse and recovery, and the life and career he built afterward. Hodgman's tale is both poignant and humorous, reflecting on the bizarre and often comical conversations he had with his dying mother.
Discussing his decision to write the memoir on his home page, Hodgman stated: "It sort of happened gradually, though I have always wanted to write something. This book grew out of my isolation and loneliness. I have few friends here anymore and little family around. It began that first summer when my mother lost her driver's license. My mother is really American in that she thrives on motion, mobility, going here and there. Too many days housebound and she gets very blue. When she could no longer drive, I found myself mourning the loss of her independence as much as she did. I wrote a little piece on Facebook about the days when I was a kid and my mother drove me to kindergarten while we sang along with pop songs on the radio. It got hundreds of responses. So, as things happened that were funny, or moving, or upsetting, I wrote them down." Hodgman then added: "Writing down gave me distance; it gave me some remove. The card table where I do my freelance work is right by the couch where she usually sits. I was literally transcribing as we spoke. I posted some of this stuff and continued to get a lot of responses. I decided to write a book, but it kept changing. My mother and I have always had a funny, bantering, unique way of expressing ourselves and loving each other. It hit me that we were kind of an odd comedy team, although there were a lot of feelings behind the jokes."

Writing about Hodgman's memoir on the Longreads blog, Sari Botton remarked: "Hodgman paints an acerbically funny, loving portrait of his singular mother--quick-witted, outspoken, but vain and guarded about her own growing vulnerability. She loves her son fiercely, but is homophobic and intransigent about her disinterest in knowing about his intimate life. Hodgman unflinchingly reveals himself, too--an out-of-work, out-of-shape, middle-aged gay man in recovery, and a mama's boy through and through, even when Betty is at her most stubborn and challenging." Botton went on to call Bettyville "a beautiful book" that "weaves, movingly and wittily, back and forth between the difficult, unfolding present and various pasts--his small-town Midwestern childhood; both his parents' deep denial about his sexuality; the height of the AIDS crisis, the heights and depths of his addiction; his highs and lows in publishing. As you follow the ultimately converging threads, and the deepening of the emotional bond, it's hard not to fall in love with both mother and son."

As Chicago Tribune Books correspondent Beth Kephart observed: "Kindness. The word is scribbled throughout the margins of my copy of George Hodgman's new memoir, Bettyville. If you think of that word as a sentimental squish, if you believe memoirs are best built for retribution and self-promotion, let Hodgman change your mind." Kephart characterized Hodgman as "a self-excavator with humane intent, a jokester with a gentle touch" who "has written what will be seen, even years from now, as the quintessential book on taking care." Meganne Fabrega, writing in the Minneapolis Star Tribune, was similarly impressed and commended Hodgman for steering "clear of sentimentality." Fabrega also pointed out that Hodgman's "'watcher' trait" is exactly what makes him successful as a memoirist. "He watches Betty, not always with the eye of a son, but as an observer," noted Fabrega. "And he does the same with himself."

For Florida Times-Union reviewer Anne Payne, "the overall tone is slightly spiky, humorous storytelling, tinged here and there with sadness. The juxtaposition of laugh-out-loud anecdotes with poignant or even grim material could be jarring, but it's all sifted together with skill and sensitivity." Heather Seggel in BookPage offered another positive critique, advising that "Hodgman writes with wit and empathy about all the loss he's confronted with." Offering further praise in Booklist, Eloise Kinney declared: "There's a lot for Hodgman to handle, yet
he does, despite the urge to give in to his own sadness." The result, a Kirkus Reviews contributor concluded, is "movingly honest, at times droll, and ultimately poignant."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- *Florida Times-Union* (Jacksonville, FL), April 5, 2015, Anne Payne, review of *Bettyville*.
- *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis, MN), March 6, 2015, Meganne Fabrega, review of *Bettyville*.
- *Tribune Books* (Chicago, IL), April 16, 2015, Beth Kephart, review of *Bettyville*.

ONLINE

Talk to me first about leaving New York, a topic that occupies my mind, to say the least. I know that you initially went down to your hometown of Paris, Missouri, not expecting to stay, and then you realized that your mother really needed full-time help—she needed you. But it also seem as if in some ways maybe you needed her, too. I know that you had lost your job. Was that a good time for you to make that move? Was it sort of good to have a place to land?

Well, this place, my parents’ house, and this town, has always been a wonderful place to have to come to. It’s great to have a home, and have a “somewhere” where you can get away. And I got a little burned out on New York, in some ways. It just seemed like publishing, particularly—well, my last job in publishing was not a particularly happy one. It seemed to me like publishing had become the domain of marketers and sales people. When I started out in publishing it seemed like such a creative thing, and there were a lot of kind of brilliant, eccentric, colorful people. And suddenly it was…I don’t know, maybe it was just the company where I ended up. Because I had a very cheerful experience with the company who published this book. But New York seemed a little to me like a place that was all about people who could pay $12 million for apartments, and also like a place where one would be less likely than ever to want to pay $12 million for an apartment.

That is a conundrum to me. I feel as if New York City just keeps getting both more expensive and more generic. It’s not the reason that people have always gone there—to be surrounded by the generic.

Yeah, except at night. I love New York at night. I love whipping through the streets at night, and the lights. Particularly in the summer, I like to have my windows up and then look out at the street and the lights, and you can hear this kind of whoosh, the sound of the City. And it makes you want to be out there. It’s definitely a different thing here. I don’t miss New York as much as I thought I would, until I come back, and then I do, I do really miss it. But then I walk down the street, and I see some woman who is carrying a purse that looks like it cost $2,000, and then you look at her hair and it looks like that cost $500, the perfect shade, and then you look at the shoes and you think, wow, that’s $1,000, whatever it is, and you know, it is a little bit obscene. And it does seem to me that New York gets more and more about the trappings. That’s not so attractive to me. I’ve always been most interested in artists and creative people.

Obviously, the place is not so hospitable for artists and creative people these days.

And I would encourage artists and creative people to leave New York. Because I know that I never could have written this book in New York. I mean, obviously I couldn’t have had the experience that I write about while in New York, but also if you’re in publishing, and I’ve been in publishing for more years than I care to admit, you hear these voices in your head, “Oh, that’s too small, it’ll never sell, it’s Midwestern, it’s gay, it’s about an old person, it’s about an old person and a fat man,” and all the commercial formulas that New York, on the one hand, pretends to eschew, but also totally lives by. If you can get out of that money head, a lot of times, you can come up with something that is much more successful than if you follow the rules and work inside the genre or according to all those people, those marketing people that say it has to be this, it has to be that, throw in a vampire.

Ha. Throw in a vampire.

So, I’m not unhappy to be away, and I sort of doubt I’ll move back there, except for the fact that I’m really drawn back because of some people who I love. I don’t know that I will stay in Paris, Missouri, but I don’t know that I need to go back to New York. Goodbye to all that. (Laughs.)

How long did you live in New York City before you left?

I moved there in 1983, and I left in 2011. I don’t want to add up how many years. You’re going to have to do that calculus on your own, because I don’t want to know.

Where was the last neighborhood you lived?
On 23rd between 7th and 8th. But my real life, my real New York life was lived on 10th Street between University and Broadway, and that’s the apartment that I had forever, and it was this studio apartment that was in an old attic, and I loved it. I wanted to stay there forever. And it was the scene of many happy times and breakdowns. But I loved that place, and even though I was happy to find the place that I moved to, and was not unhappy there, there was something about leaving that place that kind of was the start of leaving New York.

**Why did you move out of it?**

Because it was rent controlled. It started out as $700 and I think I was paying $1500 by the time I left, and it was an amazing deal, but they wouldn’t do anything. And I also couldn’t buy it. And there’s also a certain point where, you know, you’re 45 years old, and you think, “If I do not make the move to a refrigerator that doesn’t live under the counter now, then I never will,” and it was a Murphy bed and a tiny kitchen. But the thing I’ve noticed is the last two times I’ve been back in New York, the conversation seems, all over the City, to turn to the notion of “Can we afford this? Do we need to leave?”

I find that New York City kind of infantilizes you, because you can’t afford to leave the apartment that really doesn’t make sense for a grown up. In order to leave that apartment, you have to make some grown up choices. And it seems like you had to make a really big grown up choice, ultimately: you had to pull up stakes and go take care of your mother. Do you think you’d ever go back, later on?

You know, I sort of feel like I’ve done a lot of time in New York, and I would rather explore some place new. I don’t necessarily want to stay here, though there’s a little college town called Columbia, about 50 miles from here. I love the look of St. Louis. They have some really great old residential neighborhoods and beautiful, beautiful old houses and architecture. I really have gotten so I love to drive around this area where I live, and the Missouri River is really close. Well, the Mississippi is too. But I love to drive around these roads where the Missouri River runs and there are these really funky little towns. They’re so gorgeous, with these old houses. In the summer there’s this one drive I take, and it looks so completely untouched. The greenery is so thick and ancient, and you know, Missouri is a nice mix of rural and college and urban. Unfortunately, the politics are not…yeah. That’s a problem.

**Were you surprised by the sort of appreciation you’re expressing for Missouri? Was it something that you felt before, or was it something you kind of discovered by way of being down there taking care of your mother?**

It was something that I have gradually discovered through the years. Because when I came back, when I started coming back after being in New York, I suddenly thought, hey, this is kind of pretty. Hey, there are two really big rivers here I didn’t notice when I lived here. It’s just been really gradual. I always loved the architecture of St. Louis. When I was a little kid I used to go there to visit my grandmother, and there are so many houses that I Just love. The notion of thinking about this place as an interesting place has kind of evolved through the years. And also, gradually, I have met people here during this stay who are interesting and wonderful in various ways to me. Kind of small town characters who are totally unlike…I mean, we don’t talk about the news, we don’t talk about books. But I like to listen to them, and they’re great.

**So, it’s a different culture, but you’ve found a place in it. Even though it’s not New York.**

Kansas City is a very hip, friendly place. Some place just named it the Hippest City in the United States. And so I think that I might like to have a small apartment in one of those places, and keep my parents’ house as a kind of summer house. I also think because of global warming you should probably buy property in the Midwest, because, I mean, New York and Florida and California—those people are going to have to move somewhere.

**Note to self. So how is it going down there for you right now? How is your mother doing? As you discuss in the book, she has cancer and dementia.**

Well right now she just let out a scream and I guess broke something or dropped something, and I’m kind of wondering what’s going on in there.

**Do you need to go check on her?**
No, it’s all right. Sometimes she just wants my presence. And you know, it’s not a great time for us, health-wise, but we’ve gotten through some of the challenges of cancer, and radiation, etc. etc., and I hope that we have that, at least temporarily, at bay. The winter is the hardest time. She can’t get out. It’s a hard time right now.

What’s it like for you to suddenly have to show up as an adult, for a parent? After living for so many years in New York, not having kids? That’s an aspect of the book that intrigued me particularly, on a personal level. I had an experience a few years ago with my mom. She had to have emergency gastric surgery, and wound up with a colostomy bag. I don’t have children. I don’t have pets. I’m squeamish. I went down to Florida for a few days to help out, and she needed help with everything from sponge bathing to quieting her mind late at night, and I realized how inexperienced I am at caring for someone in that way. And how freaked out I am by it.

Well, I am an anxious, nervous, worried person. I began to worry about this, like, when she was in menopause. Is this the end? I’d wonder. And so I’ve been really kind of obsessed with it in my head, like, what are we going to do? How am I going to handle this? What’s going to come? And before my mother lost her driver’s license, which is what really led to my being here long-term at the beginning, she had a ball. And it’s somehow easier for me to be here than to worry about it from afar. But I also just didn’t know whether I could do it. I didn’t know whether I had it in me. I didn’t know how it was that I was going to get her out of this house and into assisted living or something. I didn’t have anybody to help me with those battles. It was just me, and I also really dreaded all kinds of paperwork, like insurance and figuring out the money, and all that jazz, because I mean, I haven’t balanced a checkbook since the Civil War. It was just this mountain of dread. I think you learn that you have to put a whole lot of your fear up on the shelf, and just take it one situation at a time. That’s all that I’ve been able to come up with. I try not to think very much about what’s going to happen.

No “future tripping,” as they say?

Right. As they say in Hollywood, I like to live in the moment. I try to live in the moment.

I’d like to ask you about your mom and the book. This is the thing I’m most obsessed with—memoirists writing about people in their life, or writing things that will upset people in their life. I’ve been asking writers about this for a long while now at The Rumpus. How is your mom handling this? Did she know about the book? Did she know you were writing it? Does she know she’s in it? That’s it’s named after her.

She knew I was writing it. I told her about it when I sold it. It was hard to get her to take in a lot of what I was trying to do, and she didn’t want to take it in. She didn’t want to really hear about gay stuff, and she really sort of tuned out of most conversations when I tried to tell her about it. And so one thing that I have tried to stress with her is that I have always had this thing in my life that I’ve wanted to do more than anything; that I’ve always, always, always wanted to write a book, and that being here made that possible, that she made it possible for me to do what I’ve always wanted to do. Although she doesn’t ever say it—she keeps it in denial—I know she has guilt about me giving up my life to be here. So I tried to position the book with her as this gift that she has given me that is something that has been a really good thing that came out of my being here. She really needs to feel that I’m happy here. Now, given my mother’s specific condition, there’s also the problem that you have to kind of explain things again and again. And there’s also my mother’s personality, and my personality, which is that if there’s a problem, if there’s something that’s confusing that we have our ambivalent feelings about, we’re just not going to talk about it and hope that it will go away before we have to deal with it very much. I think the book has been that for her.

Does she know it’s called Bettyville?

Yes. Sometimes, when she deigns to acknowledge it, she calls it “Betty Land.”

One of my favorite conversations about this was with Vivian Gornick, about how her mother dealt with the publication of Fierce Attachments, Gornick’s memoir about her relationship with her mother. Her mother was really, really upset about it, and they didn’t talk for a while. Then, like a year later, when the book was a success, her mother was autographing copies.
As an editor, I’ve seen people go through this so many times. You have to wait for the world to tell the people around you that it’s okay. As Elizabeth Taylor said, “There’s no deodorant like success.”

The whole business of writing about other people has been a real dilemma for me, and for so many writers. Especially when you haven’t given those people the courtesy of letting them die before you write about them.

I think everybody’s situation with memoir is different, but there’s always so much to deal with. I thought my mother would be dead. Or I thought my mother would not be mentally with us. I started this book as a gift to myself to compensate for the fact that she was not going be here, in a way. So I really didn’t think this was a problem that I was going to have. I’m happy to have it, you know, I’m happy she’s here, but I mean we may have to get some sort of union negotiator in here. It opens so many boxes and it’s not just her, it’s my family.

Are there family members who are upset about what’s in the book?

I mean, my aunt and my cousins. And you kind of have to face the fact if you write a memoir that you are a somewhat aggressive person, that you are appropriating lives, in a way, that aren’t yours. And you put yourself out there and you try to be really generous, and you do what you can to get permission, but a lot of times the permission is meaningless because they have no idea to the extent that you’re going to examine, or what you’re going to say. My mother was like, “Oh you’re writing a book.” And she didn’t say, don’t write it. But she had no way of knowing the places I was going to go with it. So memoir is a total minefield, as you know. It’s best if you write the book and leave the country.

Has anybody in your family come forward and said, “How dare you?” or anything like that?

The last few months have been very, very worrisome because of this. My cousins were very shocked by it. I mean, there is the mention of sex in the book, of my actually being a sexual being, so that went over like a lead balloon. It’s like all of these things that people take for granted when they read books every day about other people—the fact that other people might be presented as complex, as not completely angelic, all these things that people are—they don’t have a problem in their daily reading when it’s about other people, but when it’s about someone they want to protect, then it’s a whole different thing. And they really are not able to see it in a balanced way. But now they seem to have come to the point where they’re glad that I have done something, and they’ve come to see it as something that I needed to do as therapy. They think, “You’ve done this as therapy.”

As if you’ve published your journal.

Yes, and it’s better than if I were upstairs with a loom.

n 2011, George Hodgman visited his mother Betty for her 91st birthday in Paris, Missouri. When he saw she needed care, he left Manhattan to live with her. But she still hasn't accepted that he's gay.

TERRY GROSS, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. Many Americans are living longer, and many of their children voluntarily or involuntarily become caregivers for extended periods of time. In 2011, my guest, George Hodgman, moved from Manhattan back to his small hometown of Paris, Missouri, to take care of his then 91-year-old mother. He's still living with her in Missouri, helping her through cancer and some dementia. It's been very fulfilling in many ways, alienating in others. Some issues that he and his mother could never candidly discuss, they still can't, like the fact that he is gay. Hodgman has worked as an editor at Vanity Fair and at several publishing houses. He's just written his first book. It's a memoir about taking care of his mother, Betty. It's called "Bettyville." Moving in with his mother started as just a visit for her 91st birthday. But when he observed the condition she was in, he decided to stay.

GEORGE HODGMAN: I went home for her birthday, and I found out that she had lost her driver's license. She was hiding the fact that she had lost her driver's license as she, you know, hides everything involved in her decline or her problems. And I have always associated my mother with mobility. If you live in a place like we live in, you drive everywhere, and you have to drive. And my mother, she was always on the road. And she sort of got a don't-fence-me-in mentality. And losing that license I knew was just so crucial, you know. It was such a bad moment for her.

GROSS: When you say she lost her license, did she physically lose it or was it taken away from her?

HODGMAN: It was taken away from her. We had had an agreement. And she was not supposed to drive except to the grocery store, to church, to bridge club. And she accepted an invitation from a bridge club in a nearby town, and she had a little fender bender. She backed into the ditch. And the policeman reported her to the driver's license bureau.

GROSS: So you hadn't - when you first visited her, you hadn't planned to stay.

HODGMAN: No.

GROSS: But you did. So what was it like leaving behind your home in New York without having planned to do that? I mean, there must have been things that were hanging up in the air. Because I think, you know, for so many people who spend so much time in another location other than their home taking care of parents, you have to keep up with your own life, too. And you left whatever life you have in New York just kind of dangling.

HODGMAN: Well, I had lost my job. I had lost my regular job. And I was doing freelance work. So I knew that I could do that there, which made many things easier. But I of course - it was just - it was people, it was leaving the people and leaving the relationships that really sustained me. And I'm in recovery. And leaving that group of people who had been so vital to me was really hard. And - but I was - when I - you know, the first year that I was there, it was sort of a matter of, well, I'm only here for another month or another couple of days. We had actually gotten my mom onto a waiting list for a really, really nice assisted living place. And, you know, I was going to stay there until she got into assisted living, but she was not accepted unfortunately.

GROSS: Because of dementia?

HODGMAN: Yes, you - she wasn't self-sustaining enough. They couldn't count on her to, you know, get dressed in the morning. She just needed too much help. And so it was - that was a really awkward moment because she didn't want to go but it seemed more of a blow even, you know, to be declined.

GROSS: Right, that she kind of flunked out of assisted living, or...

HODGMAN: I know, you flunk out of assisted living, it's...

GROSS: ...didn't pass the exam to get in, yeah.
HODGMAN: That was very awkward. That was really hard. And - but the thing that happened was that I didn't dislike being there. Doing freelance, you're alone all day. And I had always depended on my work so much to give me social life and family and connection - a sense of connection. And I hated being in a New York City apartment building by myself during the day. There's a particularly empty sound of the elevators going up and down. Or, you know, occasionally you get an opera singer who you'll hear, you know, from another floor, or, you know, on a really big day, maybe a couple of delivery boys. But it's just - it was lonesome. I hated it. And I - it had been a really long time since I had been a part of a normal functioning household with three meals a day that you don't order from someone, and I liked it.

GROSS: What are some of the things you have to do to take care of your mother? And I'm thinking of the more difficult things that - you know, again, a lot of people go through this who are suddenly - you're bathing her parent or maybe even diapering them. And you're exposed to a part of their personal hygiene and of their bodies that you were not privy to before. And it could be a very awkward turning point in a relationship between a parent and a child.

HODGMAN: Well, I try really, really hard to respect those boundaries. We have a woman named Carol (ph) who works with us and comes in and helps me a lot. And I - you know, I try really, really hard to give my mother her space and her independence and not to be intrusive. But I always say that - I mean, a huge part of my job seems to be convincing my mother to do things - convincing her to wear new shoes or wear boots in the winter or change her clothes or eat. I mean, it's really depressing for me. A lot of people, as they progress in their dementia, their appetite lessens. And that just breaks my heart because my mother has enjoyed food so much in the last few years. So I think that a good part of my role is to just do little things that make her as happy as possible all along the way - every day. We - you know, about once a week, we watch "Dirty Dancing."

GROSS: (Laughter) Every week?

HODGMAN: Yeah, well, it's a really good movie. And she's got a little crush on Patrick Swayze. And I try to encourage her emotional feelings, and - but it's like mothers do with a child, in a way. You try and come up with treats. And my mother had never read books. And she suddenly - I was home, and I was reading, and I started giving her books to read. We started with Nicholas Sparks. I don't think there is anybody in this world who is more thankful for Nicholas Sparks than I am.

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is George Hodgman. And he's an editor, a book editor. But he's written his own book, his first. It's a memoir about moving from Manhattan back to his hometown in Paris, Mo. - a very small town - to take care of his mother who is now in her 90s.

Your parents were never comfortable with you being gay. And you could never really talk about it to them. They knew at some point. But do you feel now that, like, she accepts that, that she gets it?

HODGMAN: I think my mother has - you know, my mother is from such a different world. She doesn't take in who's gay. She doesn't think about gay. She hasn't ever been around gay people. And when I told her that I was gay, she sort of acted like it was, you know, I had a cold and I might get over it. Or she just - she doesn't understand it. And sexuality is not something that we have ever, you know, spent much time discussing. And I just - we've never been good at going there. We've never been going - good at going private.

GROSS: So can you be fully yourself in the home? Can you invite a man over? Are you out in town now?

HODGMAN: Well, there are no men.

GROSS: (Laughter).

HODGMAN: I mean, there are no - do you know any in Missouri?

GROSS: (Laughter).

HODGMAN: You know, are you listening?

GROSS: (Laughter).

HODGMAN: I - you know, it's a completely different social atmosphere than I'm used to. And I could, you know, I could bring someone over. I couldn't have someone - you know, I can't imagine that I would have someone stay overnight. I could introduce
my mother to someone who is a friend. I don't know that she would perceive that it was, you know, a romantic situation or a dating situation. But she - you know, she would be open to meeting a friend. It - you know, that has not been an issue so far. But I don't feel deprived. I really don't. I feel part of a family, which is nice.

GROSS: Do you also feel like the pressure is off to meet somebody because you kind of can't right now, so you don't have to think about it?

HODGMAN: Well, yes, I do. And, you know, I wanted to write a book on my life. And I felt great pressure to do it. And when I came to Missouri, I had totally given up writing a book. And the book happened. So maybe the same thing will be true of finding a partner.

GROSS: So do you have friends from childhood who are still in Paris, Mo.?

HODGMAN: Yeah, I do. I have linked up with several.

GROSS: How about the bullies who used to bully you when you were a kid? Are they there now and do you have a relationship with them?

HODGMAN: Well, there was one person who gave me a huge amount of trouble. And I encounter his wife on Facebook. And she's very reactionary. She's really right-wing and is very, very vocal about her feelings. And I just - you know, I read her post and I think, oh, my god. It would be you. You know, you would be married to him.

GROSS: By guest is George Hodgman. He is a book editor and now an author. His new memoir is called "Bettyville," and it's about how just a few years ago he returned to his hometown, a small town in Missouri - Paris, Mo. - to take care of his mother who is now in her 90s. Let's take a short break, then we'll talk some more. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. And if you're just joining us, my guest is George Hodgman. He's written a new memoir about how in 2011, he moved from Manhattan back to his hometown in Paris, Mo., a very small town, to take care of his mother - and this was on her 91st birthday - and he's been basically living there ever since. And right now, she has lymphoma and also some dementia. The town of Paris, Mo., where your mother lives and where you're living with her - you describe it as having a population of 1,246-and-falling (laughter). That's a small - that's a real small town. Would you describe it a little bit for us?

HODGMAN: Well, when I grew up in Paris, Mo., it was a town where there were - it was a town run by merchants. My parents were merchants. My mother's family owned lumber yards, and my father drew houses and built houses, worked out of the lumber yards. There were dress stores, and there was a little department store. And the merchant class was so important to the town, and that merchant class has disappeared now. And so you walk down the street or I walk down the street, and I - there's so much that I miss. There are people that I miss and a sense of a thriving little town. And Paris is still thriving. It still has a real sense of community. There - that has not been lost. And there's neighborliness. And all - you know, the small-town virtues that one thinks about when one considers rural life. But there is - you know, you are really aware of economic change there. And, you know, millions of people have made the point that Wal-Mart has destroyed small-town America, but it has.

GROSS: Is there a big Wal-Mart in Paris, Mo.?

HODGMAN: No, there's one about 20 miles away. There - well, there are two in - one in about - one in 25 miles away and one, 20.

GROSS: Do you have to drive for 20 minutes to buy anything?

HODGMAN: Well, you can go to the Dollar Store. And I've gotten so - I kind of like the Dollar Store. I go to - you know, nothing wrong with a $12 sweater. I've certainly given up a lot of my New York affectations about fashion, which is cool, which is all right. But you can go to the Dollar Store. And the grocery store is fine. The grocery store is really good. And, you know, there are a lot of places that sell things like antiques and things that people have made. And there's also now Family Pawn, so if you have any earrings you want to get rid of, I'll come to Philadelphia and collect them.
GROSS: (Laughter). You quote someone as saying that three things have changed small towns - Wal-Mart, which you have described, the end of family farms and meth. And, in fact, your grandmother's house ended up becoming a meth house, and there was a homicide in that house. Do you find that meth has changed the area that you're from, where you're living now?

HODGMAN: I see a little bit of evidence of that. I see less than I would expect in Paris. Missouri is the number-one state for meth. And I think that, you know, in some of the nearby towns, there's much more evidence of loss from drugs - abandoned houses, places where you see the curtains always seem to be shut. But it was in my grandma's old summer kitchen - we had a summer kitchen, and she used to sit outside on the steps when she had babies. And in the summer nights - Missouri's really hot in the summer, and I used to clean up that summer kitchen. And the notion that people were making meth in there was very, very sad to me.

GROSS: Are you out in the community? Do the people who live there, particularly the ones who knew you back when you were a child, do they know you're gay?

HODGMAN: I guess I am out now...

GROSS: (Laughter).

HODGMAN: ...Because they're all eager to - just at this very moment, they're reading this book and probably finding out more than they ever wanted to know. People know I'm gay. It's not discussed. It's not, you know, how's your lover or, you know, do you like that new Barbra Streisand record, or whatever. It's part of what they sense about me, but it isn't really talked about. I don't know, really, what we'd say about it. It's - at this point, at my age, if you can't be yourself wherever you are, I think it's as much your problem as the people you're around. And I just - on this trip, there's nothing that I conceal. You know, I am myself now there. My humor and my - you know, I don't hold back anymore. And I talk...

GROSS: You said, at your age. What is your age?

HODGMAN: Fifty-five.

GROSS: Do you feel, like, more comfortable being yourself now than you were before you moved down there?

HODGMAN: Well, I think that I have felt increasingly comfortable in sobriety. That's been - I mean, I've been working on that a long time. But I think that I feel, in Paris - I mean, I'm so directed towards her, and so I don't have the energy. I don't have the ability anymore to put up any fences or, you know, spend time being less than myself. There's something about the situation that has just made me very real. When you're up close and personal with somebody with this kind of problems, you're not so worried about whether they, you know - the term I heard recently is that somebody had sugar in his pants. You don't worry about whether they think you have sugar in your pants.

GROSS: (Laughter). My guest is George Hodgman, author of the new memoir "Bettyville." After we take a short break, he'll talk about, how do you respond when your elderly mother says, I bet you wish I was dead. And he'll tell us about recently learning that his parents never spoke to each other about the fact that he's gay. Also, our rock historian Ed Ward will do a retrospective of The Hollies, whose hits in the '60s included "Bus Stop" and "Stop Stop Stop." I'm Terry Gross, and this is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross, back with George Hodgman, author of the new book "Bettyville," a memoir about moving in with his 91-year-old mother, Betty, in 2011 which meant moving back to his childhood home in the small town of Paris, Mo., a very different life than the one he'd become accustomed to in Manhattan where he'd worked as an editor at Vanity Fair and at several book publishing houses. And for Hodgman, who's gay, it meant moving from a city with a large gay population to a town with no visible gay culture. Hodgman is still living with his mother, helping her through cancer and some dementia.

Your mother used to play piano in the church that she went to.

HODGMAN: Yes.
GROSS: And you write in Paris - in Paris, Mo., religion is the great comfort. I imagine you take your mother to church. Do you find any comfort in church?

HODGMAN: I find comfort in all forms of community. And I am very, very moved by the church that I found there. I think I inherited a kind of stereotypical notion of holy rollers and Bible beaters and, you know, right-wing fanatics. And it had replaced what I grew up with, which was a very loving church community. And going back there - I mean, I've become so grateful for the fact that my mother has had a community of people who looked after her through the years when I wasn't around. And, you know, it's a lot of the people from our church who have stopped by and who have tried to take care of me who have given me advice. I walk my dog around town. And, you know, it's people who come out of their houses and - from our church. And I do find comfort from that. And I respect it. And it's - religion in our town is so much softer than people might imagine who, you know, hear about Missouri or hear about all of the awful things that are going on in Oklahoma or these nearby states. So I do. I draw some.

And I love the fact that people - I find prayers a beautiful thing, and there is this incredible community of people who pray for my mother. And it's easy to sort of dismiss that. But it's also - you know, when you think as you put your mother and tuck her in at night and you think that all around town people are saying prayers, that's very reassuring. It's lovely to feel, you know? You feel like you're kind of sleeping in gentle arms.

GROSS: You know, I'm getting the sense that you both feel this sense of community living with your mother through the church, through her old friends, through the fact that it's a small town where everybody knows each other. But at the same time, I'm sure that there's also a part of you that is not getting expressed. And I'm not just talking about being gay and having, like, no gay community there, but also as somebody who, like, reads a lot of books, as somebody whose job is editing books and editing articles - somebody who's lived in Manhattan a long time. I mean there's just, like, a whole frame of reference that you probably have few people, if anyone, to share with.

HODGMAN: That's true.

GROSS: And I think that's an issue when you return to, like, your parents' world to take care of them, and it's like it's a nice world. It's the right world for them, but it's not your world.

HODGMAN: Well, one of the things about small-town life is - and it's something that I developed when I was a child - is you have to work harder to find intellectual or creative things to do. And I think that - I mean, I always love those small-town people who are actively nursing their little passions all on their own. And the thing that's happened - and the book is an outgrowth of that - is, you know, partially because I've always worked with reporters who were somewhat sociological and who reported like Anthony Shadid reported about the people of Iraq. And I worked a little bit with Kate Boo who worked about - you know, who then was reporting about the slums of Washington. And so being in Paris, one thing that sustained me is that I was interested in the place. And I was interested in what has become of the place. So that has preoccupied my mind, and I've been almost subconsciously reporting it and listening and hearing.

What I do feel very much is the disparity in my political beliefs because, you know, this is really anti-Obama territory. And it's very conservative. And that conservatism - I mean, that's what is implicitly threatening to me as a gay man.

GROSS: One of the things you found out when you moved down to take care of your mother was that your parents never talked to each other about you being gay. Was that hard for you to fathom?

HODGMAN: That was one of my more painful moments. It was really painful because to discover that they couldn't even acknowledge it to each other was something that I carried for a long time and considered. And I think that what I came to is that - my parents are far from being prudes. And they weren't really rigidly religious, but they were religious. They were brought up in churches. And they really couldn't get beyond the idea that this was a sin against God.

GROSS: You write, (reading) I never wanted to hurt my parents. That has always been the excuse for not making more of an effort to force them into a reality where they could really know me.

HODGMAN: Yes. I copped to being a coward. I didn't push it. Part of my situation was that I was an only child. And so I was not only gay, but I was the only child who carried all the expectation - who all - who had - you know, I had to have the grandchildren. I had to be a success. I mean that's not - they didn't - there wasn't this horrible pressure, but it was a kind of unexpressed feeling. There was a lot that - a lot of my parents' dreams that I felt that I carried and hopes.
And so - I really - you know, I don't want to feel sorry for myself, but I do feel that I maybe carried a little bit more burden because of the only child thing. And I don't - I love my parents so much. And I also - if you're an only child, I always say that people in families where there are children and adults - there are two groups. But an only child is - you know, you're with your parents. There's only one group. There's the three of you. I think from the beginning I saw my parents in a very real way, and I saw certain vulnerabilities. And I didn't ever want to hurt them. And I did feel this burden of wanting to protect them from myself.

GROSS: You know, you mentioned that you were the only child so the pressure was on you to, like, be married and have grandchildren and give them the things that they'd want out of their only son. And you didn't marry. You didn't give them children. But you've had - even though you're kind of officially unemployed now and are doing freelance work, you've had a nice career. You've worked for several publishing houses editing books - some very highly regarded award-winning books. You were an editor at Vanity Fair. But the thing is, these were probably not books that they would have read. They probably did not subscribe to Vanity Fair. So it was kind of off the map for them, maybe.

HODGMAN: You're the only person who ever got that. That's something I never said. And it was really - no, they didn't read the books. And they don't know who the people were. And my mother was very excited about Vanity Fair. And she became more and more excited as she understood it more. But that place - you know, my life - that part of it - they weren't participants in that part of it. Now, that's not to say that there weren't many other parts - you know, many other places were shared. But you put your finger on a place that has been kind of a nagging struggle.

GROSS: My guest is George Hodgman, whose new memoir is called "Bettyville." We'll talk more after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. My guest is George Hodgman. His new memoir, "Bettyville," is about moving from Manhattan back to his childhood home in Paris, Mo., to take care of his elderly mother, Betty. He moved there in 2011 when she was 91, and he's still there taking care of her.

You quote your mother as having said to you once, I bet you wish I was dead. How do you respond to that?

HODGMAN: That's one that it'll just stop you in your tracks. I mean, I think that everyone who is around an old person has to deal with that, I wish I was dead, I'm ready to die, I've lived too long.

GROSS: And you never know whether that's a real invitation to have a conversation about facing the end of life or whether that's just said in frustration or said to get a reaction - you know, some pity or - 'cause it's not necessarily an invitation for a reflective moment about the end of life.

HODGMAN: No, but in my mother's - like, one thing my mother doesn't have is self-pity. She really doesn't. She also doesn't have fear of death. She never had fear of death. I mean, the first impulse is always distraction. Well, let's have a Bloody Mary, or, you know, or let's - let me take you to get your hair done - whatever. That's the first impulse. But I try my best to explore it a little bit if she's willing. And it usually leads to a discussion of what we could do to make her a little happier.

GROSS: What are some of the ways you've come up with to try to do that?

HODGMAN: One of the things in this book is I try to express that, in the middle of a country, there's kind of a longing for travel and a longing for other places. Our town is called Paris. And there are all these towns - what's called Versailles, Cairo, Rome. And these Missouri towns are - the names are an expression of the longing of wanting to sort of be in the world. And that's - I think that longing has been a part of my grandmother's and my mother's life. And so I try to talk to my mother about places that I've gone. And I try to talk to her about trips that she's made. I get out old postcards from her trips. And so I try and psychically take her out of the house in one way or another.

GROSS: So your mother now has some dementia. She has cancer. She's in her early 90s. Are you planning on living with her through to the end? Have you thought about that?
HODGMAN: I want to. It just depends on the situation. I wrote a piece recently, and I said, I hope that the cancer and the dementia meet at a civilized place and give her peace. And I think we're nearing the end of our road. And, you know, it's too late now to back out.

GROSS: This is maybe too personal, but do you think about what you will do after she dies?

HODGMAN: All the time. All the time. And - because what I realize is that if you have been around somebody - and, I mean, this role, caretaker, it sounds so stiff. It sounds so boring. It sounds so old lady-ish and I don't like it. And - but if you have been focusing your life on somebody, when they're gone, it's like this huge hole. And I know there's going to be a huge hole. And so I'm trying to prepare for how I'm going to fill it. And I know that a new act of my life is going to begin. And so I have to dream up a new self, a post-Betty self. We all do with our parents, I think. You know, when our parents die, the world changes.

GROSS: So here you are, in your 50s, taking care of your mother, who is in her 90s. As it stands now, you don't have children. It's not too late - maybe you will, maybe you don't want to. Who knows what the future brings. But if you don't have children and, say, maybe you're single when you're older, do you worry, like, well, who's going to take care of you?

HODGMAN: I want a community. I mean, I am single. But I have always needed to be a part of a community. If it was a work community or when I was a part of - when I used to go to Fire Island with my gay friends, we had a house. We had a household, and it felt very familial. I gravitate towards communities. If I - I'm not ever happy in a work situation unless there is a sense of a community of - in the workplace. And so I know that when I consider - and I do - you know, what - how do I want to live my old age? You know, I say I want to be in some sort of community. My fantasy is - in St. Louis, there are all these amazing old houses. And all over Missouri, there are these amazing old houses. I'd love to restore an old house and fill it up with my favorite single people. I would like to spend my old age in some kind of community.

GROSS: George Hodgman, I wish you the best. I wish the best to your mother. Thank you very much for talking with us.

HODGMAN: Thank you.

GROSS: George Hodgman's new memoir about moving to back to his hometown to take care of his elderly mother, Betty, is called "Bettyville." Coming up, rock historian Ed Ward does a Hollies retrospective. This is FRESH AIR.

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Coming home to care for an ailing mother is a path many a grown-up child has followed. With Mo Rocca now, we pay a visit to one:

For twenty-five years, George Hodgman was one of the publishing industry's top book and magazine editors.

Rocca asked him, "If ten years ago someone had said to you, 'You're gonna go back to Paris, Missouri, to take care of your mother,' what would you have said?"

"Oh, I would have said, 'What other tragic thing can happen to me on this planet?''' Hodgman replied.

But five years ago, he found himself far away from New York -- back in his hometown of Paris, Mo., taking care of his widowed mother, Betty.

"I've had this terrible fear all my life that I couldn't do this," Hodgman said. "I was an only child. I was gonna be alone with this. And it involved all kinds of things that made me terribly uncomfortable -- taking over my mother's taxes. I can barely do my own taxes! I thought the 'Medicare donut hole' was a breakfast special for seniors."

"I had to come up with three meals a day. I was like, how do they know all these things to make? Because I'm down to Jell-O and tuna fish casserole with potato chips on it, and maybe I'll buy barbecue potato chips because maybe that would throw a new kind of zesty thing into it."

He began to write, for therapy. "It was a way to not feel sad, and kind of get it out of my head."
After George Hodgman returned to his hometown to aid his ailing mother, the bestselling memoirist became the "Mick Jagger of elder care."

CBS NEWS

"When dealing with older women, a trip to the hairdresser and two Bloody Marys goes further than any prescription drug."

"I was able to write the book, because I didn't hear New York talking to me," Hodgman said. "If I'd gone to them and said, 'I want to write this book about a fat man and his 90-year-old mother,' I would have been laughed at."

The book is about Betty and George. But it's also about George coming to terms with the town where he was raised. "I thought of this place as kind of church territory, and as a gay person, I was not so comfortable," he said.

"You thought of this as, that's my past?" Rocca asked.

"Yeah. That's my past. And it's not my world."

Coming home meant driving along those old familiar roads. ("Tulips! See the tulips?")

"My entire summation of my mother is this woman with dyed-blonde hair and a Kent cigarette and racing that car to meet the school bus and with us kind of singing along with this pop music," he said.

Betty played the piano at her church for years, and she kept on playing, even when dementia clouded her mind and her fingers began to fumble.

"I don't expect that she'll play for church again because the last time she played for church, she dropped her music on the floor and uttered a word that one probably should not utter during a church service," Hodgman laughed.

Starts with? "It starts with 'God' and it ends with 'damn it.'"

Hodgman says he's no martyr. He came home for one simple reason: "I came back here because I like her. I just like her."

"Both of you are funny. Do you laugh around the house?" Rocca asked.

"A lot. We do."
She also reads. Books about American history are fine, but Betty's guilty pleasure? "The Secret Confessions of Ava Gardner." "It's the most vulgar book I ever read," Betty laughed. "It is!"

"But you enjoyed it!" Hodgman added.

Betty shows Mo Rocca some of her favored reading material.

**CBS NEWS**
Hodgman has come to appreciate the people of Paris as never before. He writes about kindness, such as fresh-cut flowers in his mailbox.

"I think those gestures that say, 'I'm here for you. I'm seeing you. I'm seeing your struggle.' It sounds cliché. But it's not."

A friend asked Betty what she felt about everyone thinking of her as a celebrity. "I'm not a celebrity," Betty replied.

"You're the mother of one," another friend retorted.

Yes, Betty's son George has become quite the man about town.

"I never fancied myself an expert caregiver," he said. "I still don't. But suddenly I'm like the Mick Jagger of elder care."

When we visited with Hodgman, his biggest worry was that Betty was worried about him.

"I think my mother has this feeling that I'm here taking care of her and that I'm in kind of retreat. And I would like her to come to terms with the fact that she has produced somebody who really cares about her. And I would like for her to wind up feeling that I was happy."

Betty Hodgman died a few months after our visit, just shy of her 93rd birthday. But she lives on in her son's loving memoir.

And George Hodgman still lives in Paris, Missouri ... a place he now calls home.

Other Resources:

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In 2011, my former colleague George Hodgman moved back to Paris, Missouri, to care for his elderly mother, whose physical impairments and descent into the early stages of dementia were gradually encroaching on her ability to care for herself.

At the time, I couldn’t believe what he was giving up: He was a successful magazine and book editor with famous friends and a degree of fame himself in certain circles. How could he go from all that to small town America, with its businesses closing up and its young people moving away? How could he spend practically 24-hours a day keeping his mother from hurting herself when, in New York, he seemed unable even to care for a houseplant?

Then, a couple of years ago, Hodgman announced that he was writing a memoir about himself and his mother, Betty. The book, *Bettyville* has been released to lots of industry buzz. Poignant, hilarious, and skillfully written, it’s exactly what you look for in a memoir. I called Hodgman up to talk about dementia, *The Golden Girls*, and what gay people can get by showing up for their parents.

**Do you think that it was a little bit crazy to do what you did four years ago, when you moved back in with your 90-year-old mother in Missouri?**

I've sort of come to terms with the fact that most of my decisions will, sooner or later be considered "a little bit crazy" by myself and/or others. But I didn't decide to move back in exactly those terms. I had been spending a lot of time in Missouri anyway, and I came home for her birthday and—though she waited some time to reveal this—she had lost her driver's license. At that point, she was only driving to the store and church, but it meant she was going to be completely stranded in her house and that just isn't my mother. My mother is an archetypal American spirit. She's gotta move, travel, ramble. She's never been the kind to stay home and stare at the soaps.

It was kind of a question of stay or watch her get depressed and fade away. Or some kind of assisted-living situation. Unsurprisingly, the latter option didn't thrill her. Or me. So I decided to stay for a while and it just got longer and this happened and that happened. More problems, you know. Fewer friends. After 90, even Madonna doesn't call. I didn't want her to be lonely and… I was just available. I also realized, as time passed, that I had been really lonesome, too, and that there was something comforting about being here. I had lost my job and was freelancing. My apartment building was so empty during the day. I felt like, you know, Sigourney in *Aliens*, stuck on the ghost ship. And I have a tendency to get in trouble when I'm not in a real structured situation. It just all evolved. It was just for another day, another week or month. Suddenly it was a year and I realized that I didn't miss New York as much as I thought I would.

**In the book, Betty seems quite lucid (and devastatingly funny) one minute, then confused and scared the next. How frequent are the “good days” and “bad days”?**

Well, that was the summer of 2012. She was starting then to become very obsessive and ritualistic about trying to remember words and other things, but the nights were already starting to get harder and harder. She's never lost her personality or her ability to be occasionally wry, but there’s this sense of anxiety she carries because she knows something is happening to her. She goes through periods where it seems like she's getting worse and then she has these periods where she seems to
have hit a plateau and is kind of coasting at that level. She's kind of all over the map and her physical health is also an issue. The mind and the body, you know—very connected.

Dementia causes some physical problems and those problems exacerbate the dementia and it's complicated. She is very strong and very vulnerable, sweet and strong-willed (very) and, yes, funny. She gets obsessed with things. Recently she has been reading and re-reading *The Secret Confessions of Ava Gardner*. She tells everyone, "It's the filthiest thing I've ever read. You ought to read it." When Ava goes to bed with someone, such as Frank Sinatra (who I believe you also dated), she refers to it as being "in the feathers." This engaged my mother's imagination. If I come out with my hair in its usual bird's-nest style, she says, "You look like you've been in the feathers." I say, "I wish."

The bad times, well — they happen more and more often. Sometimes I just lie in bed in the afternoons because I can't deal with her asking the same questions over and over. I stay up really late at night just to have some quiet time to myself. My hours are very unorthodox.

Betty is so cranky, and you’re so snarky, at times I pictured the two of you as Statler and Waldorf while I was reading your book. You talk in the book about how dissimilar the two of you are, but do you think you got your sense of humor from your mother?

You know, the woman who helps us, Carol, kept saying how funny we are. We have always had this bantering, bickering, jokey way of speaking to each other. Sometimes it shocks people. But I think I decided to do the book because of the humor and the slightly Harold and Maude eccentricity. I think I did get her humor and her family's humor, but a lot of Missourians in this area are very dry. You know that Twain guy, Mark Twain. He was from down the road. Missourians are funny except when they decide to talk about how much they love their guns, which they tend to do. Occasionally, there is the random comment about shooting the President. Like me, Betty is a Democrat. When people start bugging her with talk about Obama, she yells across the table, "Be still!" This tends to throw a determined Republican matron who has just arrived with a perfectly respectable Jell-O salad into a state of, well, concern. Anyway, this is a long way of saying that I didn't want the book to go in either a too tragic or too Hallmark direction. I started listening for the times when we were kind of our own kind of comedy team.

Do you two talk about what it is that you're doing for her? Has she expressed any gratitude to you?

Older people are not great with gratitude. Also, my mother is sort of in denial about what I'm doing. If she allows herself to be too conscious of the fact that I am here, leading this sort of Emily Dickinson lifestyle, she will become too guilty and sad.

I think she has to kind of tuck the reality of how this has changed my life away. My mother has always been fierce in her attempts to make me independent. When I was a toddler, she sent me on a cruise. I mean she was always trying to get me out of the house when I only wanted to turn her closet into a Saks branch. She would never tolerate this if she weren't really scared. It doesn't bother me that she isn't gushing out thanks. But I do wish, since I have worked hard to learn to sort of cook, that she would say she liked a meal. I say, "How was that?" She always just says, "fine." Sometimes you want to just scream, "If you were in a nursing home, you'd have a scoop of tuna
salad, old woman.” But you don't, because five minutes later she does something that nearly makes you cry.

**Speaking of Saks branches, I get the sense that you’ve never discussed your being gay with your mother. Is that because you fear that she wouldn’t approve?**

We talked about it. It wasn't the greatest interaction we ever had. Then we talked about it a little more. Every time I brought it up, she seemed surprised that I hadn't changed. I think she thought gay was sort of like having a cold or maybe being pregnant. It was kind of temporary. Gay is just not part of her experience here.

She never knew gay people and it's not like she is just determined to bring up anything that involves sex. At least not until she started reading Ava Gardner. Now it's “the feathers” all the time. Anyway, we have evolved a way of loving and supporting each other that doesn't involve conversations about things that are uncomfortable for her. I should have tried harder to bring her along. I would discuss this more, in more depth, but you would need a ten thousand-word article. We are not a case study in parent-child communication, but the fact that we are the way we are makes for a better book, a more interesting situation.

**Well, as the country ages, as we gray, I think more and more of us are going to have to start doing what you're doing. I wonder if it's going to be harder for the gays, since our relationships with our parents are often problematic.**

Well, it feels like dementia and Alzheimer's are almost epidemic, but look at America. Everybody's nuts. At least the elderly have some sort of chemical reason. I think that it is appropriate for children to be drawn into caring in some way for their elders. They cared for us. It's natural. It's a part of life that you have to deal with and it doesn't feel like some terrible obligation because you love them. You may never love them so much as when you see them trying so hard to hang on.

Also, the thing is—even though it is stressful and often exhausting—it does make you more human. I didn't have kids. I didn't have pets. I couldn't keep a cactus alive. This has been good for me. Hard. But I'm less self-centered. Which leaves me still very self-centered. Betty and I are kind of the country and western Debbie Reynolds and Carrie Fisher. We do have some fun.

I imagine my own old age as sort of like *The Golden Girls*, where me and some friends rent a house and savage each other verbally until we die. I'd be Dorothy and you, of course, would be Rose. So what about you—do you ever think about your own old age, and who might take care of you?

I think about my old age a lot. I think *The Golden Girls* got it right. You need a family, a community, I think. I'd love to have a nice old house with great old friends, if we all hard a place to be private, too. I don't want to be alone.

**Oh! And [our mutual friend] Johnathan would be Blanche!**

Johnathan would monopolize the bathroom. He grooms, what, nine hours a day?

**I remember reading a very early excerpt from *Bettyville*, and then, a couple of years later, when your agent was shopping it around, I heard about it from, like, every editor at every publisher. It seemed like everyone wanted to publish your book. How did that make you feel?**
There weren't that many who wanted to publish it. I mean, people said it was "small." Publishers still think gay doesn't sell. Dementia victims aren't exactly the new *Fifty Shades of Grey*. I got the usual amount of rejections, but I expected that. I was happy with the people who liked it the most. They were the people who I kind of most wanted to please, people whose books I liked, people who I thought were not just good editors but nice human beings. Overall, the process of selling a book is pretty confusing. There is such a range of opinion and you kind of have to just tell the agent, "Call me when someone brings up money," because it is hard to know whether you have written something good or something that is completely unpublishable. Also, memoir is really hard because it's you, bare and vulnerable. When they say the main character is not likable, well, you tend to notice it a bit.

**But now it's out and getting amazing notices. One last question: do you worry at all about what Betty will think of *Bettyville*?**

Yes. Handling Betty's feelings about the book that came out of this is very difficult. I want to make her part of the process if it's a good process. You know, let her be happy if it's successful. But there is so much in this book that would make her uncomfortable. I think I am going to just say, "Here, here's my book, and give her *Gone With the Wind.""
Paramount TV announced Thursday that it is adapting “Bettyville,” journalist George Hodgman’s memoir of returning to his small Missouri town to care for his ailing mother. John Hoffman (“Looking,” “Grace and Frankie”) is penning the half-hour dramedy. He and Hodgman will exec produce with Archer Gray’s Amy Nauiokas and Anne Carey.

“With ‘Bettyville,’ George Hodgman has written an exquisite memoir that is unflinchingly real and deeply touching. It’s a narrative that resonates and entertains, and we are thrilled to have an opportunity to adapt it for a television audience,” said Amy Powell, president of Paramount Television. “We are also excited to be partnering with John Hoffman, a great talent and seasoned storyteller, as well as Amy and Anne, who share our passion and vision for developing high-quality, original programming.”

The book is said to be a sometimes hysterical, sometimes heart-wrenching story of a mother and son who are trying their best to make things right and to redefine the home they find themselves sharing once again.

“I was in love with George’s memoir by page 10, and I called John Hoffman by the time I hit page 40,” said Carey. “John and I both grew up in the Midwest, and I knew immediately he was the perfect match for George’s funny and poignant story. Archer Gray is very excited to be developing this material with Paramount TV. We could not imagine better partners.”

“Bettyville” joins a list of other literary titles currently in the works at Paramount TV, including “The Alienist,” which recently received a series order at TNT, and Dustin Lance Black’s biopic “Lindbergh.” Hoffman is repped by Joe Cohen and Tiffany Ward at CAA, Rosalie Swedlin at Anonymous Content and Michael Gendler at Gendler & Kelly.