

**Book title: Hamlet's Dresser: A Memoir**

**Author: Bob Smith**

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**Reviewed by:**

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This is a book of memory – hence the term ‘memoir’ – but of memories described with unusual clarity, honesty, grace, and pain. Bob Smith shares the story of his young years, living in a family that is dysfunctional but attempting to survive. In addition to his parents – who have their own set of unique problems – Smith’s family includes his sister, who has severe cognitive and emotional/behavior disabilities. The book, not written in linear, chronological sequence, weaves together his love for his sister, Carolyn, with this honesty about his need to escape her presence, his guilt at her eventual institutionalization, and his realization that she has always been and will continue to be a part of his life. Bob Smith’s lonely and isolated life was literally saved by his discovery of William Shakespeare. A librarian gave him a copy of *The Merchant of Venice* and the line “In sooth, I know not why I am so sad” seemed written specifically for him.

The book becomes an exploration of how a life spent with Shakespeare – serving first as the costume assistant or “dresser” for the actor playing Hamlet in the early days of the American Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, CT, then acting, directing, and currently, conducting workshops on reading Shakespeare for senior citizens in New York City – can be a life redeemed. The book is filled with quotations from Shakespeare’s works that enlarge and illuminate Smith’s thoughts and feelings, and help the reader to understand both the power of emotion and family and the power of great writing. For those of us in the field of special education, it is also an intense and honest description of the days when children with disabilities were simply contained – in some cases imprisoned – at home, and the cost of such policies to families as well as to the individuals themselves. This book was, for me, an astonishing piece of work, and one that I would highly recommend to anyone who wishes to share in the salvation of soul through poetry.

*There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will—  
Hamlet, 5.2*