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Great with Child

SUE NORTON

Writers and Their Mothers, edited by Dale Salwak. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 258 pages.

The popular British philosopher Alain De Botton posits that one reason so many people in the modern world harbor the desire to become writers is because “writing is in certain ways an act of very polite and artful revenge on a world too busy to listen and that we would never develop such fierce bookish ambitions if we had not first been let down by those we needed so much to rely upon.” While De Botton doesn’t mother-blame, he does believe that writing serves as a kind of compensation for “our unrequited ache for more visceral forms of contact.”

On the surface, his theory is a tempting one. But if the accounts of maternal influence that unfold in Dale Salwak’s collection *Writers and Their Mothers* (2018) are anything to go by, it may be rather facile. In their diverse essays, Salwak’s contributors do and do not, to varying degrees, ‘blame mothers’—and do and do not credit mothers—for the angst, joy, and creativity of the many well-known artists discussed in these pages, starting with William Shakespeare, whose mother, Mary Arden, was “temperamentally and physically resilient” and who, owing to her higher social rank, very likely “held the initiative” in her marriage (4). She was, in short, formidable. However, any wish on the part of the reader to discover which type of mother—effusive and affirming, or remote and withholding—yields ingenious writers, gradually subsides as too naïve and simplistic a question. As Philip Larkin famously wrote in his short poem, “This Be The Verse,” “They fuck you up, your mum and dad. / They may not mean to, but they do.” And if that is true, that each of us is inevitably snarled, then a connection between writerliness and parenting, between bookish ambitions and our early experiences of disappoint-

ment or rejection is also fairly random in the shape it takes. Whether our needy, childish love for the parent has been fulsomely requited or not, we all, according to Larkin in the same poem, end up in “misery.” His own love for his mother was very much requited, and, as mothers go in this collection and in life, Eva Larkin was an enviable mother to have. According to their extensive, decades-long correspondence, she was solicitous of her son’s well-being throughout her life, and he of hers. They shared a mutual sympathy and a great deal of affection. But Larkin wrote with as much commitment to the craft as if he’d been “Unwanted,” the title of a poem by Robert Lowell, whose mother Charlotte Winslow was, according to biographer Jeffrey Meyers and Lowell himself, narcissistic in the extreme.

In the book’s preface, Salwak tells us that he was seeking to explore “the early maternal influences on an artist,” asking “how they were manifested in the work?” (vii). The answers he was hoping to elicit would be “personal and anecdotal, philosophical and practical” and would be composed by prominent critics and by poets and novelists themselves who were interested to know “[w]hat happened to writers who were wounded by their mothers? What were the links between childhood joy and sorrow and the growth of individual genius?” (vii).

What emerges over the course of twenty-two chapters, the first nine biographical and the second thirteen autobiographical, is that these “links” between maternity and verbal proclivity are as nuanced and complex as human relationships themselves. Lowell had a ‘bad’ mother and Larkin a ‘good’ one. Louisa May Alcott had a liberal-minded, supportive mother nearly too good to be true, and Sylvia Plath had a very fine mother as well. Both daughters wrote vocationally, both wrote brilliantly, yet one lived out her natural days contented by her own scribing hand and the other, of course, did not. Similar to Alcott and Plath, Walt Whitman was sweetly nurtured by his mother, but John Ruskin and Samuel Beckett were taunted and “haunted” respectively by theirs, even though both had mothers who could accurately be described as devoted (49). In every case, the writer—whether the product of an ideal, tender, and selfless mother, or a less than perfect, perhaps even deeply self-involved mother—flourished *as a writer* if not, necessarily, as an eventual husband, wife, mother, father, lover, or friend.

Such diversity of outcomes begs the question of whether the links between mothers and writers are less related to the dynamics and quality of the relationship than to the intensity, or at least availability, of dialogue. The picture that emerges over these sequential stories is that verbal engagement was often pronounced in the growth experiences of the young writer. The women who became the mothers of the children who grew into writers *said things*. William Golding’s mother,

his daughter Judy Carver writes, told “many Cornish stories” (52), and her father, with his “novelist’s imagination” (56), tended to shape her and other women “according to his priorities” (58). Golding saw feminine interaction, with its gossip and intimacy, as a kind of mysterious, idealized “witchcraft” (58). His mother, Mildred Mary Agatha, was rather sadly preoccupied with social class, but she also “protected” him and was extremely “loyal” (63). We learn, too, that she could be “sharp and very direct,” even acerbic and harsh (62). She was, in other words, fully rounded, fully human, loved her son, and had a lot to say. Much of what she said he rejected, writes Carver, as he also rejected “much of his mother’s world” (61). But the basis—the link—for conscious and subconscious dialogue was firmly in place from an early age. Perhaps the same was true for Judy Carver and her father, because her chapter about him has tremendous verbal flair and is one of the most compellingly personal in the first half of the collection.

Margaret Drabble’s exploration of Samuel Beckett’s relationship with his mother, May Jones Roe, is also highly engaging, in part because Drabble allows her own personality to inhabit her narrative. With her friend and fellow writer, Niall MacMonagle, Drabble peeked around shrubbery in salubrious south-county Dublin to discern what they could about the “close and combative,” “inextricably involved” (39), well-documented relationship between Beckett and his mother. What comes to light is that Beckett’s mother, like Golding’s, had a lot to say. Though Beckett struggled with “her persistent claims on him” and with her determination to keep him “dependent, grateful, in need of her care,” she was also committed to his education, though “disgusted,” eventually, by his writing (48, 44). Once again, the stage is set for the writer-offspring to “battle for recognition and acceptance” from the procreative-figure, out of which comes art (45).

The autobiographical section of the book, which follows the biographical, differs not only in vantage point but also in tone. Describing their mothers in the first-person, the writers offer personal reflections clearly derived from powerful feelings, often confessional, that, as Wordsworth wrote of poetry, take their origins from emotion recollected in tranquility. The poignancy can be palpable, yet deftly contained too, as in Ian McEwan’s essay, “Mother Tongue: A Memoir,” in which McEwan reveals the depth of his sorrow at the slow loss of his mother who, at the time of composition, was fading away through vascular dementia. But it also establishes the link, this time a living link of gratitude, between mother/child dialogue and the propensity to write. Rose Moore appears as a linguistic antiheroine in the evolution of her writing son’s talent, at least at first. McEwan tells us that she was colorfully talkative but sometimes inhibited by her village colloquialisms in class

conscious England. She curbed her tongue—her mothering tongue—when in the company of those of higher social standing. Entering adolescence, McEwan absorbed the implicit self-censure, the message of inferiority, so that when he began to write seriously in the 1970s he was, in his words, “joining the great conversation of literature which generally was not conducted in the language of Rose or my not-so-distant younger self. The voices of giants were rumbling over my head as I piped up to begin, as it were, my own conversation on the train” (118). McEwan attributes his eventual confidence with the multifaceted aspects of the English language, the high and the low and everything in between, to the second wave of feminism, which he rode with enough romantic enthusiasm to, as he put it, “set my mother free” (122). It is a satisfying moment, this payment of gratitude, not only to his mother but to the radical women writers and thinkers, such as Germaine Greer, who were his peers.

Gratitude is a dominant feature of the dialogic link between many of the contributors to Part II and their mothers, including husband and wife writers Ann and Anthony Thwaite, poet and professor Rachel Hadas, detective novelist Catherine Aird, and memoirist and children’s writer Reeve Lindbergh, the daughter of aviators Charles and Ann Lindbergh. Their narratives attest to warmth, intelligence, and humor in the maternal aspects of their upbringings that helped them to become writers. Their kind, attentive mothers loved language and reading and, in the case of Ann Thwaite’s mother Hilda, believed in “the need for writing,” owing to a three-year separation during World War II. Thwaite writes, “It was the fact that in our family we all write easily that made us able to survive the separation without lasting damage. It was a bond with my husband, Anthony, who as a child in America, also did not see his mother for years. . . . During the five years the war lasted, hundreds of letters (and later airgraphs) crossed the world, and many parcels of books” (136).

Lindburgh’s mother, too, was highly literary, as were all of the Lindburgh friends and family. So nurturing was Ann Morrow Lindburgh, that her daughter characterizes her voice as “the uninflected voice of truth, clear as water, answering all my questions and quenching every thirst” (144). Rachel Hadas tells us that “books were the lingua franca of the household” (172) as she was growing up in the devoted care of her mother Elizabeth Chamberlayne, a Latin teacher whose soul bore the “essential qualities” of patience, discretion, generosity, and sagacity” (179). Far from causing “wound” or “sorrow,” as Salwak partly expected to elicit through his compilation, these mothers of writers fostered creativity in every conceivable way, even literally through conception: Hadas believes she inherited

her poetic leanings via her mother's DNA, "the raw ingredients" that in her have been "recombined" into imperishable parts that have made her capable not only of writing, but of loving (179).

Wounds and sorrow are, however, present in the recollections of Martha Oliver-Smith. They are so present, in fact, that she names one subsection of her essay about Martha Bacon, her novelist and poet mother, "Scarred for Life." A dedicated writer with a string of troubled marriages, Bacon neglected her children as and when required by her greater commitment to the written word. At one point in Oliver-Smith's childhood, Bacon dismissed her bleeding finger as "a nuisance" (159) because it interrupted her flow at the typewriter. This kind of physical and emotional neglect was routine, and perhaps it led Oliver-Smith to develop fierce bookish ambitions, to use De Botton's phrase, so as to compensate for the absence of more visceral forms of contact.

Compensatory creativity may be somewhat true of Martin Amis too, but his essay only hints at pain. He grew up in maternal circumstances of casual neglect, raised rather randomly by his father Kingsley Amis, along with his third wife, the writer Elizabeth Jane Howard, and his natural mother Hillary who was "lovelorn," living in a manner that was "lax, bohemian, and chaotic" (182). Not that he appears to have minded: his essay "My Wicked Stepmother" is humorous, playful, and, like McEwan's, rather poignant but even more contained in its emotion. Its dominant quality is literary, in that it is a short, sharp, masterful piece of writing, one that, along with the poetic tribute by Rita Dove, the image-rich essay by Andrew Motion, and the grippingly phrased extended eulogy by Tim Parks, lends further belletristic qualities to the book as a whole.

David Updike's contribution is also nicely literary. He writes partly in the present tense, which provides a quality of stasis, a timelessness that replicates the lasting influence we all experience as children of our parents. Unlike Amis, Updike seems less intent to amusingly immure himself from the poignancy of family circumstance: he tells us flatly that for his elderly mother, Mary, "loneliness is one of her quiet battles." He is nearly moved to tears by sifting through family photographs. It is "emotionally laden work" he says, as he contemplates the infinite ways his mother supported his earliest writing with lavish praise "beyond its merits," even though her own pursuits as a painter, had "taken a back seat to being a mother, and to her husband's rising career" (203, 201). Updike's compassion for his mother's marital disappointments comes across as not at all burdensome. He registered her pain, but she did not inflict it on him. Instead, she continued to provide "domestic stability" and always "made art appear to be a worthy lifelong pursuit" (204, 203).

Whatever suffering occurred in the years of her marriage to Updike's increasingly famous father, no bitterness or rancor comes across in his writing here. No bitterness, indeed, seems to have inhibited his mother, who went on in life to paint and exhibit in her own quiet sphere of community and family. His essay, written while she was still alive, is called "Mrs. Gabbet's Desk," which refers to a photo of his maternal grandmother writing at the desk of a family friend in 1908. We recognize that his mentality as a writer derives not only from his father but also from his mother, who looks at this century-old photo in a way that suggests she herself has inverse maternal feelings for her own composing mother. She remarks to David, "She's such a good girl," leaving us with perhaps the most salient moral of the book as a whole: we are forever encapsulated by our parents, perhaps by our mothers in particular, such that their effect upon us is simultaneous with our past and our present, our creativity a congenital pulse, no matter the fate of their own.

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