

suffer a 1996 whitewashing that obliterated its spectacular decorations; the “restoration” funds came from Saudi sources that demanded that an austere Wahhabi interior replace the richly decorated walls characteristic of Balkan Islamic architecture. As early as 1945, Poles began to reconstruct Warsaw. In producing an exact replica of what had been razed, the builders rescued their old city, but they also created an amnesia about their recent history. In the great crater that was the World Trade Center, those who consider rebuilding an act of resistance are in conflict with those who want to make the site a permanent memorial to the thousands who died on September 11. The tension between creation and memorial is all the

greater because we are so near to the horror of the event.

“All things fall and are built again,” Yeats wrote in “Lapis Lazuli,” “And those that build them again are gay.” The poem suggests that people will go forward and rebuild with undiminished hope despite the ever-growing weight of cultural destruction. But we cannot shrug off the terrible devastation that is so much a part of our contemporary condition. Better to follow the words inscribed on a plaque attached to the ruined wall of Sarajevo’s national library: “Remember and Warn.”

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In the Shadow of His Sadness

Reviewed by Ann J. Loftin

I NEVER STUDIED WITH Bernard Malamud (1914–86) at Bennington College, but I remember seeing him at a party on campus in the mid-1970s. He’d brought along a pedometer and was telling everyone within earshot that it didn’t measure what they thought it measured. I remember thinking his clowning unseemly for the renowned author of *The Fixer* and other dark tales of the Jewish and immigrant experience. Reading this memoir by his daughter, I realized that it was also the sort of behavior he rarely displayed at home. Once, she writes, Malamud began telling her a story from his childhood, about stealing some movie tickets: “Quickly embarrassed, he stopped himself midway through the recollection. I was in my thirties.”

Now a therapist practicing in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Janna Malamud Smith remembers a father who guarded a tender nature behind a reserved and formal persona. She describes a psychologically probing mind that drew the line at self-revelation. The survivalist humor that lofted

MY FATHER IS A BOOK:

A Memoir of Bernard Malamud.

By Janna Malamud Smith.
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otherwise dark stories such as “The Jewbird” and “The Magic Barrel” appeared in life only episodically. No doubt her father’s own reticence colored the essay she wrote for *The New York Times* in 1989, three years after his death, “Where Does a Writer’s Family Draw the Line?,” in which she considered the competing claims of posterity and privacy and came down on the side of privacy.

The book that followed, *Private Matters: In Defense of the Personal Life* (1997), began with Smith’s childhood memories of a family “organized to protect” her father’s need for privacy—tiptoeing past her father’s study, diving for the phone lest it disturb him, keeping voices down so he could work. In life, all bowed to the magnitude of his absence, and for many years after her father’s death it seemed only right to keep him out of sight still. However, as Smith observes in *My Father Is a Book*, “One day I realized that my father’s life had shifted from something overshadowing into something disappearing from view.” And suddenly she felt it urgent to bring him back into the foreground for her consideration—as a father, writer, and fellow human—before letting the biographers and historians take their turn.

Children of celebrated writers have a tricky time of it. As Cynthia Ozick observed, writers are cannibals, devouring family at every meal. Certainly the two Malamud children (Smith and her older brother, Paul) and their mother could not have relished reading the veiled account of their father's affair with a Bennington student, in Malamud's 1979 novel *Dubin's Lives*, any more than Janna Malamud relished her similarities to Dubin's daughter. A memoir about the famous father is the child's chance for payback, therapy, or wishful thinking. Smith seems to have resisted those lures.

But by limiting herself mostly to what her father wished her to know about his life (he left his journals and some letters), Smith cannot avoid a certain Janna-centric perspective. Her brother barely features in the drama. She devotes a chapter to her father's relationship with the Bennington student but declines to interview the woman in question (who, interestingly, became a therapist, like Smith herself). Finally, writing about her father's childhood proved challenging because Malamud hated talking about his childhood. The one time she asked him to reminisce on tape as a record for his grandchildren, he obliged for a few minutes, then stopped and asked her to erase the tape.

Malamud was the elder of two sons born to a poor, Yiddish-speaking couple in Brooklyn. His father, Max, a grocer who worked seven days a week, was a kind but ineffectual man, a first-generation Russian immigrant whose ambitions had been winnowed down to mere survival. His mother suffered from mental illness, probably schizophrenia, and became obese. Bernard came home from school one day, at age 13, to find her on the kitchen floor eating Drano. He rushed to a pharmacist and managed to save her life, but she died a few years later in a mental hospital, possibly as a result of suicide. Malamud's younger brother, Eugene, likely inherited the mother's schizophrenia and also died young in a hospital. So Malamud's was a childhood useful primarily for its motivating sense of dread—what not to become—and for the abiding guilt and shame he would later extend to his fictional characters.

As did many Brooklyn-born writers and intellectuals of his era, Malamud received a first-rate classical education in New York City's public schools, first at P.S. 181, then at Erasmus Hall (built by the 18th-century Dutch to resemble Oxford) and City College. While working and tutoring, he later earned a master's degree from Columbia University, with support from a government loan.

Malamud began recording ideas for short stories in his notebooks at age 21; though ambitious, these earliest writings showed no special promise. Smith observes that her father didn't progress much beyond a derivative literary style until he discovered Freud. Psychoanalytic ideas, she argues, "were part of what permitted him to stop fleeing himself and his life." The revelation that moral codes weren't handed down from on high but originated in psychological conflict allowed Malamud to draw characters from his childhood and to see the struggles of untaught, unsung immigrants as worthy of high literature.

Janna Malamud was born in 1952 in Corvallis, Oregon, as far as could be wished from the immigrant experience. The Malamuds bought a pleasant house within walking distance of Oregon State University, where Malamud had taken his first full-time teaching job. While the disciplined young author worked on his days off to produce his first novel, *The Natural* (1952), followed by *The Assistant* (1957) and the award-winning short-story collection *The Magic Barrel* (1958), Janna savored a privileged American childhood of back yards, Girl Scouts, and rides in the family's pale green Plymouth. From the time she was little, Smith writes, she rested secure in her father's love. She also knew what her father expected in exchange: "I . . . understood early and deeply that he was wary, quickly betrayed, easily hurt. He disliked being challenged, and I protected him instinctively. I felt acutely his massive, silent sadness."

In 1961, to Janna's dismay, her father jumped at the chance to leave the anti-intellectual West for the high air of Bennington College in Vermont. Any fantasies of scenic New England quickly gave way

as Janna discovered what we graduates well know: There's nothing wholesome about Bennington. Though the college gradually lost some of its intellectual luster after the 1960s, it retained its dire sophistication, deadpan promiscuity, and cult-of-personality atmospherics. Janna and her brother struggled to adapt while their parents embraced the new culture and did as the Romans did. Malamud got involved with a student. At some point, Smith tells us, her mother took similar license, though at least her love object was off campus and long past consenting age.

Apart from a two-year visiting professorship at Harvard, Malamud remained on the faculty at Bennington for the rest of his life, clearly finding the atmosphere conducive to work. He published another collection of short stories (*Idiots First*, 1963), then his third novel, *The Fixer* (1966), based on the true story of a Jew in czarist Russia. It won a National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize, cementing Malamud's fame. He published four more books—*Pictures of Fidelman* (1969), *The Tenants* (1971), *Dubin's Lives* (1979), and *God's Grace* (1982)—to mixed reviews. Some critics said his argument with God seemed to wither into a seminar once his characters left the urban Jewish milieu of his early works. Others applauded Malamud's willingness to take on larger themes, such as black/white relations in America and man's survival in the nuclear age.

Smith barely discusses her father's later books, but she recalls in great detail a traumatic incident that Malamud wove into the semi-autobiographical *Dubin's Lives*. On Thanksgiving weekend in 1968, she reluctantly consented to drive her father to his office on the Bennington campus. (He didn't drive.) A novice at the wheel, she felt enraged, she remembers, by her father's implicit assumption "that his writing needs trumped all other hands." Just before the college's stone gate, she lost control of the car and crashed full force into a tree. Her injuries were minor, but the impact broke two of her father's fingers and a rib, and an internal head injury took many months to heal. As parent and child staggered from the car, Smith recalls, "[he]

looked at me and finally spoke. 'Where is my manuscript? . . . I need my manuscript.' He somehow opened the back door [and] retrieved his pages."

"I'd nearly killed him," she writes, and in doing so "[I], so particularly trusted and heretofore innocent, had joined the ranks of endangering, near-deadly women." He forgave her, of course, but upon whose shoulders does a near-patricide rest easily? For Smith, no doubt this memoir serves as a form of expiation; her father, in *Dubin's Lives*, simply recast the incident as the fault of his main character and alter ego.

When Janna went off to college the following year, guilt propelled her need for independence. She went so far as to cut the phone line in her dorm room lest her father call. "I found his need for me oppressive, felt angry at his oversize, insistent presence. . . . I had a dreamlike vision of him as a large hot-air balloon, at once lifting the family and consuming all our heat to fire his updraft." Not surprisingly, what Smith remembers most vividly about her father's final two decades—years in which she married, had children, and pursued a career in social work—are the health problems that beset him. Malamud's heart, always his weakest organ, required bypass surgery a week before his 68th birthday, in 1982. He lived another four years, but he never fully recovered his ability to write.

Smith ends her memoir with a letter Malamud wrote to her in college. Tender on the surface, Malamud's words implicitly contrast his daughter's easy passage through life with the hardships of a boyhood he often summarized with the phrase, "I was gyped."

"I miss you," he wrote. "It was a pleasure to have you here most of the summer. At the same time I'm glad you're back at college because I know that's where you want to be. . . . You're one of the happy few who can make their own world." As this memoir makes clear, Smith did make her own world, but not without facing down some of the shame and sadness Malamud imparted to all his creations, as they struggle to break free of the past.

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