

## PSYCHOANALYTIC LIVES: BIOGRAPHY AND MEMOIR

A POT FROM SHARDS: A MEMOIR. By *Joan Wexler*. New York: International Psychoanalytic Books, 2019, xii + 251 pp., \$24.95 paperback.

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The fractured structure of Joan Wexler's haunting memoir replicates the author's lifelong challenge to make sense of a life that seemed to defy the construction of a coherent narrative. Relationships were always mutable, as was the definition of "home," and even as she writes her story she notes that it still "almost seems dangerous to try to make sense of things" (p. 113).

The story begins *in medias res*, when, in 2008, the author picks up the search for her long-missing father. As if looking over her shoulder at the computer screen, we see the "blurry facsimile of his death certificate" come into view, and perhaps catch our breath as she must have done (p. 2). This public record turns out to provide some precious, if sparse, factual information, but raises new unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable, questions.

The first such question, as Wexler tries to obtain an official copy of the document, is that of her "relationship to the deceased." That in fact is a central question of the book and of the author's life—the definition of relationship. Wexler's father, dead ten years by the time she saw his death certificate, last lived with her when she was two. She has a few memories of visits during the next three years, before, she writes early in the book, "all contact with him ended. There were no letters, no birthday cards, no photographs, and no child support" (p. 3). This summary is at odds with an episode recounted later, illustrating the ongoing difficulty of forming a single account that can encompass all of the relevant information. In fact, she tracked her father down when she was a senior in college (having discovered that he lived not far from her) and spent an afternoon with

him. In that story we see how narcissistically self-involved he was, how little interest he had in this young woman as a person in her own right, and how oblivious he was of his paternal relationship. Disturbed by his maudlin ramblings and alarmed by his seeming confusion of her with her mother, she is unwilling to see him again.

Like Lisa Romeo's memoir of her father, *Starting with Goodbye* (2018), this book shows a relationship that came more fully into being in the author's mind after her father's death. Both authors seem to have been propelled at the end of a parent's life to interrogate the truth of their emotional bond. Unlike Romeo, however, Wexler had almost no experience of having a father, and although her mother sometimes spoke of him, those conversations never included his relationship with his daughter. She heard about the man her mother had loved and then hated, but nothing about whether he had loved his child. "A whole pot revealed from a few shards is how I now hold in mind an image of my father—more missing than present, fragile and broken" (p. 8).

Like Nick Flynn, whose mother discouraged him from learning anything about his father (a con man who perhaps fortunately had left the family early), Wexler is searching for a father she had never known. One of the unstated preoccupations in Flynn's 2004 memoir, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* (his alcoholic father's comment on living homeless in Boston), as in Wexler's, seems to be the question of whether the father, and thus part of the self, was good or bad. A chance comment from her aunt suggests that Wexler's father may have been gay, and she wonders if that essential part of him made marriage impossible and thus his departure less of a rejection of her.

While the book's announced theme is the absent father and the search that gives the book its title, it is at least as much about mothers. Just as Wexler tried to construct a portrait of her father from a sparse collection of memories and stories, she seems, like Alison Bechdel, in the graphic memoir *Are You My Mother?* (2012), to be searching for a mother as well. Although not an analyst, Bechdel invokes Winnicott and, like Wexler, the psychological perspectives that she hopes will make an inscrutable mother more real.

Wexler and her mother moved into an apartment that she calls "the girls' dormitory," where they lived with Wexler's grandmother and aunt. The household's defining commonality was the absence of any fathers. The grandmother's own father had left the family when she was eight,

and her husband decamped when her son and two daughters were still young. Both adult daughters called their mother “Mama,” and Wexler was never encouraged to refer to her in any other way. Without a word for “grandmother,” she struggled to define her own family, made up of “one Mommy, one Mama, and one Natalia . . . [and] one Daddy who I sometimes visit” (p. 44). The intimacy, animosity, and intensity of that multi-generational household evoke the claustrophobic feminine community described by Vivian Gornick in her memoir *Fierce Attachments* (1987). After Gornick’s father died, her mother’s bereavement made Gornick herself little more than “a prop in the extraordinary drama” of that grief. Gornick’s mother, like Wexler’s grandmother and aunt, was out of her mind for a time. The other women who lived in the apartment building became like family members whom her mother loved, hated, embraced, and fought with, in an ongoing pageant that was the backdrop of Gornick’s life, as the “the girls’ dormitory” was for Wexler.

Neither of Wexler’s parents had in any way planned to have a child together, and her mother was not so much ambivalent about her relationship to her daughter as in a frequent state of denial about that inconvenient reality. Wexler muses that in the “girls’ dormitory” two generations seemed to have been fused, as if she were her mother’s much younger sister. For much of her early life she was consigned to the care of the grandmother she called “Mama.”

The book’s unnumbered chapters, of varying lengths and styles, invite the reader to experience the memoir as a collection of linked essays. The fragmented and often nonlinear structure is almost a character in the narrative—a self that is constantly battling confusion, dissociation, and misdirection to arrive finally at the story of a life. Despite a timeline, which is a welcome guide at the beginning of the book, the reader often feels confused and unmoored, as we can imagine the author herself did, not only in the living of that chaotic life but in the writing of it.

Perhaps the overarching theme in this work is *erasure*. Wexler’s father was erased from her life (and she at times colluded with that deletion, telling a childhood friend, to her later regret, that he was dead). At three or four (the author is not quite sure how old she was, as is the case with many details of her life), she herself was obliterated when she was sent to an orphanage (for reasons that remain murky but clearly had to do with her mother’s denial of the fact of her daughter), or when living for extended periods of time with her grandmother. While Wexler believes it was her

grandmother who rescued her from the orphanage by agreeing to take care of her, “Mama” was sometimes nurturing and attentive, sometimes absent, and sometimes dangerous. She herself had experienced the trauma of a broken and scattered family when she was a child, had been abandoned by her husband, and then lost most of her European family to the Holocaust. While she was the most reliably present of the three mother-figures, she was also a “frightening or frightened” figure (Main and Hesse 1990, p. 175) to whom Wexler had to cling despite bearing the brunt of her grandmother’s unpredictable bouts of paranoia and abuse.

Wexler’s mother repeatedly tried to rub out the reality that she *was* a mother, and when she did engage with that role could not see her daughter as an independent and separate person. This mother figure was “refreshing and exciting” (p. 71), in contrast to the grandmother’s constricted and depressed personality. She enjoyed her daughter’s admiration, as she did the attentions of men, and once said, “you are my greatest audience” (p. 70). She related to her daughter sometimes as a much younger sister, conveniently cared for by someone else, and later as a confidante, telling her too many details of her love life and seeming “to forget that [the person she was speaking to] was her daughter and still a young teenager” (p. 165). Wexler interprets this problematic dynamic from her adult analytic perspective, theorizing that being overexposed to her mother’s dramatic sexual escapades left her “so frightened to explore sex” that she had almost no intimate relationships, sexual or otherwise, before an early marriage (p. 165).

One of the most difficult challenges for the memoirist, as William Zinsser counsels in a foundational essay, “How to Write a Memoir” (2006), is to make “a series of reducing decisions” about what to leave out of one’s life story (p. 113). If you write about one parent, he says, leave the other for another book. In this memoir, Wexler seems compelled to catalogue what she knows of every person in the family, even those not central to the narrative, and one gets the sense that she is determined not to leave anyone out, having herself felt both forgotten and denied.

This work, taken as a whole, addresses a question all too often posed to survivors of traumatic childhoods: “How can you be all right?” There is never a simple answer to that puzzle, but in this case it is clear that the author possessed extraordinary resilience despite her suffering. From an early age she was able to take in and preserve positive experiences from the various people she encountered (a single memory of her father’s

physical affection, her aunt in her less-crazy times, a brief visit with her grandmother's geographically distant but emotionally engaged cousins, a dance teacher, even two imaginary siblings), forming a kind of internal good object, a mosaic of the best qualities of those figures. Her own creativity, whether from her father or her artist aunt or completely her own, contributed to her ability to find and express the story to be found in even the most disorganized experiences. Despite early disappointments, she took advantage of psychotherapy, eventually becoming a psychoanalyst herself. Perhaps her greatest triumph was to move beyond the man-hatred shared by her grandmother and aunt, and the desperation to be pursued and rescued that led her mother into many failed relationships, to what seems to have been a solid marriage, and to motherhood. Here too she found and internalized qualities she needed by observing other mothers, especially those who "enjoyed their children" and could also "be so reliable that their children barely gave a thought to their permanence" (p. 105).

Throughout the book, Wexler mentions many "stories" (often little more than statements or comments) she heard about her father, mother, grandmother, and aunt. Sometimes she brings her analytic perspective to "interpret" a story, such as her mother's account of a fire in the apartment building where she lived as a newly fatherless child with her mother and siblings. A "burly fireman," she remembers being told, picked her up and "threw me down the stairs to another big fellow who caught me in his arms." Wexler observes that her mother "lived out this story for the rest of her life. She longed for and was excited by men. She never gave up wanting a man, and like the scene with the fire she went from one to another" (p. 46).

Wexler's very existence was repeatedly denied or pretended away. When she was a toddler, her mother posed as a single, childless woman in order to get a job, and asked her daughter to call her by her first name. (Wexler, showing what seems to have been a characteristic tenacity, stubbornly continued to call her "Mommy.") When Wexler and her grandmother visited Florida for several months (without her mother or aunt), Wexler's uncle, not realizing "that I was coming too," and angry that his mother "had the nerve to arrive with yet another little sister in tow," alternately ignored his niece and teased her with a constant edge of sadism. Like Wexler's mother, her grandmother was capable of pretending the child didn't exist until it became impossible to hide the fact. When her mother later married an eccentric, self-involved bachelor, and Wexler hoped they might become a "normal family," she overheard him shout to her mother,

“you didn’t tell me she was coming, too!” (p. 146). Desperate to preserve the hope of having a family and a father, Wexler asked to use this man’s last name, pretended to like the food he preferred, and covered over in her mind the fact that he neither loved nor wanted her.

At three or four, around the time she was sent away to the orphanage, Wexler invented an imaginary sister, whom she named “Judy.” She resurrected that sibling when she was seven, left behind in New York with her grandmother when her mother “went away for a very long time.” She describes the elaborate games she played with Judy during the months her grandmother “became a mad woman,” keeping both of them inside for weeks, using her belt as a switch while screaming “dance, dance!” The fusion between Wexler and her “sister” remains even in her present account of that time. She writes, “Judy and I started a new game we called *journey in a covered wagon*,” which seems to evidence both a nearly psychotic disconnect from reality and a lifesaving ability to take refuge in an imagined world. Over and over, “we rode out across the country to meet up with our mother,” bringing food, sitting around an imagined campfire, and anticipating reunion: “We’ll all be so happy to be together again. She’ll pick us both up and spin us around.” Wexler’s mother had left her with “some good toys,” including an elaborate dollhouse in which, during that terrible winter, she imagined a mother and father and baby. “The little family was so enticing that I wanted to crawl into the dollhouse with them. Once, I broke a little chair trying to sit on it. I was probably going mad as well” (p. 110).

The author has clearly spent most of her life trying to understand her absent father, her grandmother, and most of all her mother, but the pot she has reconstructed from shards is, ultimately, herself. From her early passionate attachment to her in-and-out mother, to a rather late adolescent rebellion, to finally, and with great courage, making a separate life as an adult, she has tried to find reasons for what her mother was like and how she behaved. In the end she achieves the depressive position, leaving behind both her early idealizations and later fury, experiencing both grief and compassion. A problematic parent’s good and bad qualities cannot, of course, be magically melded to form a “good-enough mother.” Instead, facing the truth requires a constant balance and realignment. Having given up calling her mother “Mommy,” Wexler reflects, “I cannot wrap my mind around Marion’s strengths without seeing her weaknesses. I can’t think of her as weak without also acknowledging her determination

and liveliness. I can't see her selfishness and lack of empathy without also seeing her good intentions" (p. 213).

Having of necessity devoted most of this book to a series of problematic persons and situations, Wexler brings the work to a close with the account of someone whose presence in her life was clearly healing, her husband. Just as she learned to mother not by how she had been raised but by observing other mothers, she became able to love in a relationship with someone who was more capable of what Winnicott (1987) called "ordinary devotion" than any of her parents or parent-substitutes had been. The marriage seems to have given her a safe base from which to continue exploring the world and herself, and even its few rough spots were catalytic factors in her ongoing self-actualization. She writes of a time when her husband was withdrawn and preoccupied and she became convinced that it was time for her to leave the marriage. Her mother, never supportive of her daughter's marriage or interested in even her own grandchildren, encouraged this mad scheme. Instead, Wexler took the more "normal" route of confronting her husband, which brought him out of his depression and back into connection. Chastened by that close call, when she so nearly replicated the multigenerational trauma of a family history littered with discarded and discarding men, Wexler began a serious and lifelong involvement with psychotherapy and psychoanalysis.

The final two chapters of the memoir seem to have been written with the author's own children in mind, and constitute almost an elegy for her husband and marriage. The account of his failing health, their journey through that sad and love-filled time, and his eventual death surrounded by their adult children and their spouses is a poignant portrait of a family that was not only far more than the "normal" one Wexler had always longed for, but a miraculous gift. For a wishful and magical child whose fantasies sustained her through great suffering, this dearest wish, in the end, came true.

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*This being human is a guest house. Every morning is a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all.*

—JALALUDDIN RUMI

The great existential psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger famously pointed out to Freud that therapeutic failure could “only be understood as the result of something which could be called a deficiency of spirit.” Binswanger was surprised when Freud agreed, asserting, “Yes, spirit is everything” (Binswanger 1963, p. 1).

The life of Angelo D’Agostino S.J., M.D. illustrates both Freud’s assertion and the sentiment expressed by the thirteenth-century Persian poet Rumi that “this being human is a guest house.” The soulful life of Fr. Dag,