Sarabande Books Interviews

Marjorie Sandor
author of
Portrait of My Mother, Who Posed Nude in Wartime

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Your stories, more than anything, seem to be about secrecy and how constraint can make a person hide even the plainest and sometimes most trivial of truths. Could you talk about this?

I've always been curious about families and their peculiar patterns, which seem to carry over from one generation to the next. In the Shapiro family, patterns of secrecy and constraint have been carried across the Atlantic by the immigrants Eva and Jake, who grew up in a place both vanished and vanquished from memory. In the title story, Rachel says that in her grandmother's house "history was a door shut tight before my mother was born—her parents' early lives long since put away in that dark bristling silence called Europe. *Enough ugliness,* Eva always said. *Why would we burden a child?"*

But what happens to that next generation, schooled in the art of not telling? Clara and Abe, in different ways and for different reasons, will follow similar patterns, learning to hide their own unresolved griefs and desires—as well as the physical suffering of Abe's final illness—out of a wish to "spare" their own children, imagining such knowledge will damage them somehow. I like to imagine that somewhere back in the lives of our ancestors, little patterns of protection and safety—the desire to keep from burdening a child—got established, and these patterns, shadowy and changing all the time, are still with us. I want to trace out the visible strands, and imagine what the consequences might be. . . . You might think of "keeping a secret," in Clara's case, as the ultimate creative or imaginative act, born out of her fear that her life will go nowhere, have no meaning. With every new secret drama, she is giving herself the sensation—titillating and dangerous—that her life matters.

Do you think the dynamics of this family could be caused in part by their Jewish heritage? If so, how?

Absolutely, if by Jewish heritage we are talking about one specific form of the Jewish American experience. There are so many kinds—like thumbprints. But this family is typical in that it came to America with a past it wanted to forget, and is haunted, into its present, by what it missed by leaving Europe "just in time." . . . The other "characteristics" that seem culturally Jewish to me are the dreamy grandfather, who is a kind of uncelebrated mystic in his goodness and prescience, and the sharp-tongued practical Eva: I think they're probably traditional figures in Jewish folk stories going way, way back. I'll have to investigate someday. But for starters, here is one Jewish legend that has always influenced my stuff. I'll tell it loosely, badly: the story goes that in every generation there are 36 "just men" who are the vessels of the world's grief, and it is on their account that God has not yet destroyed the world. The most beautiful thing about the 36 just men is this: they have no idea who they are.

Maybe that's the ultimate mystery of character, and why Rachel might hope that there is a living connection to an unknowable past, and that the future—whatever it is—is also written there. We sense it's there, but the answer is, like the Jewish Messiah—something we long for, desire, and await. It is written, but in a language we haven't yet learned to read.

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Your stories are all told from a very difficult point of view, omniscient first person, but this complexity is intensified by the fact that Rachel not only covers the inner minds of her grandmother, mother, father, and brother, but also a span of about seventy years. How did you manage to write in this way?

Sometimes this point of view feels ill-advised and dangerous—like some crazed architecture or baroque fugue. But finally, it's the only way I can handle the dynamic of freedom and constraint that fuels my impulse to write, and that keeps me pressing to know more about my characters. I think I ended up writing this way in an effort to break through my own inhibitions as a storyteller. I grew up the youngest of four kids, and always had the feeling I was missing something crucial, or getting the story wrong. Inventing, or praying that my memory was right, I'd leap out into the family conversation with some story, and everybody would look at me like I was nuts. Rightly so, I'm sure. At the dinner table in our family, stories were an endless source of fine disagreement, but what was wonderful and terrifying was that each person was sure they had it right, and told their version with tremendous authority. We still do. But early on, it felt—to me, as the youngest—like a fierce competition. Could this be where Rachel's narrative voice comes from? She always begins from a position of brief authority: *here is the one thing I know*, she says. All the arguments, the imagined bits, the speculations and failed memories spring from that brief spark of authority. She is constantly "fishing" for the truth, sending out different kinds of lures to see what will take. It feels like an honest position to start from, and I love playing with a variety of methods: speculation, memory, invention, and possible tiny truths flecked all around. Maybe it's akin to painting: wanting to use different brushstrokes very close together. . . . I'd say the first person omniscient offers the best opportunity for *scope*—and for imaginative discovery—of all the voices and forms we know about so far.

Abe's confession, perhaps the biggest secret in the family, is saved for his deathbed and is told at the very end of your collection. Why?

Actually, it's even crazier than that: he visits Rachel as a ghost, after death, to make his confession. I mean to suggest by this that the dialogue between family members, especially on unresolved things like secrets, continues long after death. Abe's ghost is conjured up out of love and yearning: he is a manifestation of the adult-child's wish to learn something new about her parents after their deaths, maybe even come to feel that she "knows them better" in the years that follow. The desire to know our parents after they're gone fascinates me: it's an extension of the child's impulse to speculate and invent. The child who may have had limited access to information and stories during her parents' lifetimes, may be free to research and discover, at last, what went down. . . .

Why save this story for last? I guess I thought of it as an act of compassion, my gift to a character who mystified me throughout the process of writing these stories. I had a wonderful writing teacher once, James Alan McPherson, who said, referring to a father in one of my stories, "You need to give him something." It took me years to figure out what he meant, but I came to understand that we must give a little bit of our own peculiar vulnerability to a character to make him really live on the page, and must love him. Who better than a mysterious father?