Lost In Maine

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In a short meditation called "My Father," British novelist Doris Lessing begins, "We use our parents like recurring dreams, to be entered into when needed; they are always there for love or for hate; but it occurs to me that I was not always there for my father."

I first encountered Lessing's essay — an attempt to make the few scraps she knows about her father fit together into something like a cohesive portrait — a couple of decades ago. But I thought about it again last week, as I moderated a discussion at Eldridge Street Synagogue. Featuring Hugh Roth and Janna Malamud Smith — the children of Henry and Bernard, respectively — the event focused on what it's like to grow up in the shadow of a legendary writer.

As Lessing's sentiment suggests, it's hard to see beyond our own needs to that of our parents; and perhaps this is doubly so when, as in the case with Hugh Roth and Janna Malamud Smith, one must also try and come to grips with a famous parent's legacy. So how do these memoirists balance the family's need for privacy with the writer's inclination toward disclosure? And how do they separate their complex feelings about a parent to "be there" for them, especially in print?

It turns out the later question is by far the most difficult one. For the record, it appears that Smith has the easier time with her father's legacy. Her recent memoir "My Father Is A Book" captures the close if occasionally strained relationship between the pair. Though Malamud grew up within a deeply troubled family that included a crazy mother, in this portrait he is, finally, a loving if distant father who sought to balance family engagement with his own drive to fully realize his artistic talent.

In Hugh Roth's case, the situation is more complicated. As "Redemption," last year's biography by Steven Kellman, makes clear, Henry Roth was a man driven to silence by profound inner turmoil in the wake of secret affairs with his sister and cousin during his teenage years. Kellman makes a convincing argument that no matter how disturbing, Roth's incestuous relationships can be seen as a "dramatic manifestation of immigrant insecurity."

Henry Roth's may well be the most famous case of writer's block in contemporary times. After publishing "Call It Sleep" in 1934, at age 30, both he and his lost classic disappeared from view for three decades. As for the block, despite a few aborted attempts at novels and a handful of stories, it would be nearly 50 years before Roth began to write again in any sustained way.

Instead, beginning in the late 1940s, Roth moved his family to Maine, landing a series of increasingly obscure and menial jobs, including a lengthy stint as an orderly at the Augusta State Hospital. These jobs eventually culminated in "Roth's Waterfowl", a tiny family operation that raised and killed ducks and geese. One detects a kind of self-immolation when reading about how Roth dipped the dead fowl into molten wax.

According to Hugh Roth, it was a time of profound retreat and exile. From his unpublished memoir-in-progress: "Winter shrank our already small house by making the unheated rooms useful only for storage. The two unheated bedrooms upstairs remained as we found them, their spareness unrelieved by decoration, and their utility signaling that rest and sleep were merely something to get done with so you could move on with the business of life."

What's especially striking about this excerpt of "Egg Time In Augusta" is the fact that that most of the piece is devoid of people. After an initial description of his parents and older brother, Roth describes a house so Spartan that relatives once took seats out of their Volkswagen bus so they would have somewhere comfortable to sit. Roth is a funny, talented stylist in his own right, and the lengthy physical description of his childhood home speaks volumes about the psychic state of its inhabitants.

Hugh Roth has picked up his memoir again after setting it aside for a few years. In addition to his reading at Eldridge Street last week, he has also appeared at a number of recent events honoring his father. The legacy of Henry Roth would be daunting for anyone — both Harold Ribalow and Leonard Michaels are among those who decided against writing biographies — and it must be doubly so for another writer in the family.

Henry Roth could be a brutal, distant father and Hugh's ambivalence about his own upbringing has no doubt made his task a challenging one. Yet the first ingredient in a good memoir is simply the distance to see more clearly — and as his father's case so famously suggested, time heals all wounds. I look forward to reading more by Hugh Roth in the future. ■

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