

BOOK REVIEW | NONFICTION

A Son Writes of His Mother's Painful Past

By ARIEL LEVE NOV. 11, 2016

NOBODY'S SON

A Memoir

By Mark Slouka

Illustrated. 276 pp. W.W. Norton & Company. \$26.95.

Refugees from a turbulent childhood are never truly at home in adulthood. It is a place we land, but our roots are elsewhere. Making the best of what we've got, we settle in, adapt, get by. But the displacement is always there, haunting and reminding us that while we may be citizens, we're still foreigners at heart. Eventually we have no choice but to confront the ravaged landscape from which we fled, return to the past and settle the score. It is a voyage home, fueled by a desire to understand.

In 2014, the author Mark Slouka was waylaid by a depression brought about by the tyranny of memory. An only child born 56 years earlier in Queens, he had recently lost both parents, who had escaped Czechoslovakia after the war. His father had died two years earlier and his mother, alone and with Alzheimer's in a rest home in Moravia, was gone in a different way. She had no memory left of him. Yet from an early age she had instilled in her son a powerful sense of enmeshment; they were one. And so it seems fitting that as her memory receded, releasing her of regret and guilt, Slouka absorbed the remains.

The past planted itself firmly on his doorstep. Fictionalizing it for 20 years hadn't helped. (He cites examples from his 2013 novel "Brewster" and a 2007 story called "Dog.") Having a family of his own couldn't distract. He'd hit a wall. "I'd have to write my way back into being," he says. And he does.

With sensitivity and grace, Slouka descends deep into the chaos of his parents' lives — before and after he was born — capturing the essence of who they were. He traces their story through the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, barely surviving the Communist coup in 1948 and fleeing to Austria, then to Naples and a ship to Australia (alongside survivors from the concentration camps) before emigrating to America shadowed by loss and grief. Zdenek, his father: rational, decent and weak. Olga, his mother: resolute, beautiful and mean.

It would take decades before Slouka recognized how destructive his mother's behavior was. As a young man, he was pulverized by her despair. "Life was a death sentence," she told him when he was 17, explaining why she wanted to die. It was his duty to rescue her.

The quest to understand his mother's madness drives the story backward. Straight lines are not drawn, chronology is fragmented, but the narrative hangs together as we discover why, over time, Slouka recognized that his mother's suffering was not his fault.

Throughout, Slouka struggles to get it right: "I'm troubled by how often loyalty trumps truth when it comes to memory, how the past tends toward uniformity — all this or all that — how revising what I remember, even when it's necessary and just, can feel like the profoundest betrayal."

Early on he learned to be the guardian of his mother's well-being. Someone had to pay for her sorrow, and the target was her only son. To liberate himself would require hurting her, abandoning her, questioning memory, all of which leave the scars of disloyalty. "It's not surprising that it took my mother so long to teach me to hate her," he writes, "or that when I learned it at last, I embraced it like an apostate drowning his doubt."

Cruelty, Slouka tells us, is not in his nature. This revelation is a release. Careful not to demonize her, he battles his rage and love (or duty, anyway) and the biological imperative he feels to protect the person who gave him life. He sets about tackling the enormous task at hand: overcoming his discomfort with

unraveling complicated truths, both personal and political. Describing a scene in 1938, for instance, when the formal announcement is made that Czechoslovakia has ceased to exist, days before Slouka's father will observe through blue curtains as Hitler's motorcade passes through Brno, the author writes: "There's no ambiguity: Adjust or die."

This instruction becomes the mandate that Slouka himself will later follow, creeping around his mother's moods, careful and conciliatory, not knowing what he did wrong other than grow up.

He does not attempt to diagnose Olga's condition. It might have stemmed from the incest she endured: impregnated by her Nazi sympathizer father at 19 and rushed into marriage. But then she might be bipolar, or her behavior might result from the benzodiazepines she was addicted to for 30 years. The particulars of her madness are ultimately beside the point. It is the effect and feelings — the shrapnel from the explosion — Slouka is interested in. How and where her rage was deployed, and the lasting damage it caused.

Embedded in all of this is a tragic love story between Slouka's mother and a man she truly loved. Slouka writes forgivingly of her affair with F., revealing that she could experience joy, even illicitly. They met at a language camp in Moravia in the summer of 1946, when she was 20 years old and already married to Zdenek. Both were Roman Catholic; the situation was hopeless. They broke up, but continued to see each other before she was forced into exile across the border. F. looked for her once in America, to no avail. In 1975, they miraculously recognized each other across a crowded intersection on a highway in Czechoslovakia. She would spend the next four or five summers with him there, pilfered interludes of happiness, and then return to her family in America in the fall. Slouka knew of this affair, and sanctioned it. After F. dies, his mother's heart flattens out.

Zdenek saved himself, eventually divorcing and remarrying. Slouka saves himself by cleaving to his own family — the one he creates. Olga returns to the Czech Republic alone, never loving her grandchildren, still at war with herself, her fury at the world undiminished by time or circumstance.

The story is spun like a Spirograph. Reflections swirl into a complex history that loops back and forth in time. The author, a novelist and essayist, has taught

writing for years, and his thoughtful and erudite reflections deepen the narrative and infuse it with compassion.

It's just that he reflects an awful lot. Perhaps we could have done with less about Slouka's unease regarding this emotional Goliath — the prospect of humiliating and betraying his mother — since the question of fairness is the starting line any memoirist must arrive at before beginning. When he addresses the reader directly (before a particularly disturbing passage he was hesitant to include), the confession seems misplaced. I want to reassure him: The passage is there because it needs to be.

On the other hand — and this is the hand that holds ours with confidence — Slouka adroitly connects what he calls “Big History” with emotional facts, blending events during and after the war with how they blemish and intersect with his parents' lives.

He acknowledges that connecting the dots of people's destinies to the larger significance of history might be a stretch — but thankfully, he can't resist. He makes an impressive case that we are made of history. In one section, he breaks down the mysterious links as follows: In 1939, his teenage father watches Hitler's motorcade pass through Brno. In 1945, Hitler commits suicide and a young journalist charms her way past Russian guards into his bunker to cut a piece of bloodstained cloth from the sofa. In 1979, Slouka is in an apartment on West 69th Street, a college student hired by an old woman to help sign checks; after talking, she presents him with the cloth stained by Hitler's blood. In 1997, Slouka — now married with children of his own — writes an essay about this for Harper's Magazine and sends it to his father, who remarks that the curtains he looked through 60 years earlier were red, not blue.

“We live in history the way fish live in water,” Slouka concludes. “Whether we know it or not. Care or not. Whether the ‘fact-checkers’ give us their stamp of approval — or not. We're of it.”

“Nobody's Son” is an intrepid memoir that explores the origins of pain passed down like genetic mutations and the responsibility a child feels to ameliorate it. With the rich prose of a novel, it is a story about escapes: Slouka's parents escaping from Communist brutality, his father escaping from the

oppression of marriage, his mother escaping from the conflict within and the author, seeking refuge the only way he knows how, escaping through words.

Ariel Leve's memoir, "An Abbreviated Life," was published in June.

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