Book Review Essay

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Poetry and Storytelling as Psychohistory

The Root Is Bitter, The Root is Sweet: In the Shadow of Madness: A Memoir. Second Edition. Dolores Brandon. New York: ORI Academic Press, 2016 (orig. 2000, Sky Blue Press). 214 pp. No index.

Two criteria determine whether a book is suitable for review in a psychohistory journal: (1) the book provides data of sufficient historical detail, together with psychodynamic insight, to be useful to psycho-historians; and/or (2) the book, together with providing data, offers psychodynamic as well as other fields' analysis of what it was like to live in a certain era, society, and culture. The memoir under review does both, with great depth, beauty, insight, and grace. Seamlessly eclectic, the book reads as a story, an oral history, a series of intimate interviews (with the author's mother and other family members), a novel, a play, a poem, an autobiography, a family biography, and more.

It is a book to be read not only with the *eyes*, but also *aloud*. Uniquely aural it could well be *performed* as Reader's Theater! Profoundly moving and courageous, the book attests to the power of empathy and identification as paths to personal resilience. It is a work of art.

Dolores Brandon discusses the *undiscussable*; she breaks the secret loyalty demanded by family shame. As she interviews family members and reflects back on her life she bears witness to the prison of childhood and gradually liberates herself from its tenacious clasp. With the book, and in public lectures about it, Dolores helps others: in liberating herself, she liberates others to have their own dark stories brought into daylight and affirmed—*"This really happened to me."*

The book documents what it was like to grow up in Canada, from the 1940's through the early 1970's, with an often violent and brutal father who suffered from manic-depressive illness. Brandon weaves incisive

poetry, prose poetry, verses from childhood songs, lyrical storytelling, fragments of operatic arias, and quotations from plays to describe how she and her family adapted emotionally and physically to daily life in the shadow of a bi-polar father's towering presence.

Brandon is both insider and outsider to the madness and its effect. She is a quintessential ethnographer, with participant observation, observation, interviewing, empathy, identification, and hard-won self-reflection—(countertransference)—as her principal instruments of understanding. She bears witness, without malice or sentimentality, describing a family living with a human volcano in their midst, never knowing when it/he—husband/father—would erupt into rages against his family and beatings of her mother—Jeanne—at night.

By contrast, Jeanne—mother/wife—was patient, gentle, and long-suffering out of genuine love for her husband—Alvin. Jeanne, whose cultural background was French-Canadian Catholic, often sang arias from French operas—which texts found their way into Dolores' narrative.

Alvin Brandon had phases of stillness and serenity, expressed in his love of music and family music-making at home. *"Seeking solace within,"* he also wrote poetry: *"Be still wild heart/ Beat not full on/ Be quiet in the night/ Remember God."* Of his poetry Dolores comments: *"To that gentle aspect of Dad's soul I cleaved/ through hell and high water in the years to come."* And *"Daddy's smile's a/blessing from God."*

On Top of Old Smokey, which her father often sang, and which the family and friends also sang in their sing a-longs, was something of his theme song. Describing how she felt when she sang that song Dolores says, *"Becoming him, so-to speak, I think/ I learned to feel the unshed tears/ that lay in his heart."* Early in life, Dolores writes *"I begin to know two aspects/ of God—Creator and/ Destroyer—because I know/ my Daddy, and God's/ in every man."*

The family musicals could be moments of loving togetherness, but they could also be frightening military-like displays with Alvin repeatedly insisting as he rehearsed and conducted the family, that he was "the boss" and their role was to obey. Despite his violent abusiveness, Jeanne stood steadfastly by him: *"We have to endure. This is my cross to bear."* Like Alvin's mother and her own mother, Jeanne was a gentle person and smoothed over family tribulations.

Drivenness characterized Alvin's style with respect to work and residence. He was forever unsettled. *"Moving was a way of life. /There had been ten moves in my first five years. There would be five more before I was ten,"* writes Dolores. Alvin was constantly seeking his fortune in new ventures, new inventions, new businesses, new things to construct. It was as if he

said: *"I feel it. We'll be in the money/ faster than you think."* Perhaps relentless pursuit of new homes and new businesses, covered over his profound sense of loss and despair.

Although he constantly accused his family of plotting against and destroying him, Dolores affirms *"There was a sweetness/ in more than one chamber of his heart./ His better self knew we loved him—/ knew we were the best friends he'd ever have."*

By 1960 the family felt their lives were in danger. One bloody night when he punched Dolores, her mother called the police, and her husband was eventually driven to the local psychiatric *Ontario Hospital,* (New Toronto, Ontario, Canada). Alvin Brandon was hospitalized there four times in the 1960's, receiving shock treatment and the first anti-psychotic, Largactil (chlorpromazine, that also goes by the trade name Thorazine), which mostly subdued him *"in a psychic shroud."* Years later, Dolores, fearing to become like her father, entered psychoanalysis. Her second analyst encouraged her ambitions to act in theatre. In acting, she found herself, her voice, and her true identity. *"I found mothers and daughters, / fathers and daughters, / brothers and sisters/ in every role I played on the stage." "Each character in her own way was like me—/ determined to break free of her past."* Like her father, she also became a poet.

There are, I think, cultural-historical-economic strands in Brandon's story that cannot be ignored. The Brandons fled the great potato famine in Ireland (between 1845 and 1852) for Canada and a new life. It would seem that the famine and the prospect of starvation cast a heavy pall on the Brandons' future lives. Dolores' paternal grandfather pursued his fortune as a hard-working pioneer in Canada. He was a restless and relentless seeker like his forebears. Like his son, Alvin, Grandpa Brandon was violent and had a terrible temper; his children feared him and as adults they often chose not to speak of him. At one point in 1954 Alvin Brandon, fearing a food shortage, destitution and starvation, amassed fifty-pound bags of potatoes and onions in their basement and lectured his family on the need for austerity.

Alvin came of age in the Great Depression. Family need obliged him to leave school in 1929 to find work. Like his father, he worked for a while in a shipyard until it closed. With employment options scarce he, like countless young men seeking a path toward social mobility, enlisted twice in the army. However, in 1939 as he was about to be deployed, his fear of dying led to a nervous breakdown, going AWOL, honorable medical discharge—and enduring shame.

These parts of the drama make me think about issues of etiology or causality in Alvin's manic-depressive illness. Is it a closed entity, traceable entirely to biology/genetics, a final cause? What is the role of the uncon-

scious in family violence? I wonder the extent to which Alvin Brandon's manic-depression was in part *shaped* by family and culture history through the intergenerational transmission of trauma and identification with his father, tracing, in turn, to generations back to Ireland; or whether that cultural and family history became *incorporated and interwoven* into his manic-depressive psychosis.

In conclusion, I would like to situate this book in the wider project and concerns of psychohistory, for I believe this book to be at the core of the psychohistoric enterprise. What does the writing of psychohistory look like? For many years the journal, *Clio's Psyche* has published poetry-as-psychohistory. In 2016 David Beisel edited a volume of psychohistorical poems, *Wounded Centuries*. In recent years, the annual conference of the International Psychohistorical Association has included panels on poetry (and other arts) and psychohistory. Increasingly, answers to such questions as, *"What was/is it like to live in this era/culture?"* and *"What did/does it feel like—what was/is the experience—to live in this age?"* are answered through poetry and story as well as narrative (psycho-) history.

For many psycho-historians, psychobiography is one of the "legs" of the tripod on which psychohistory is founded, the other two being group psychohistory and the history of childhood. *The Root is Bitter, The Root is Sweet, In the Shadow of Madness, A Memoir* is primarily psychobiography (in the context of family biography)—*of the author by the author.* Because the interviews with her mother and other family members are integral to the narrative, it is also oral history based on storytelling and empathic listening. Implicitly, the book is an account of the era in which Dolores lived and lives—from the 1940's through the present. Thus it is autopsychobiography *and* autoethnography—reflexive psychobiography.

Brandon's memoir is simultaneously a treasure trove of data *for* psychohistorical analysis, and an exemplary study *in* psychohistorical analysis. I highly recommend this book for psychohistorians and scholars in the neighboring social sciences and humanities. It is inspired and inspiring.

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