



Dani Shapiro

BY JESSICA TEISCH

LIFE IS MESSY AND UNPREDICTABLE, and, despite our illusion of control, American writer Dani Shapiro knows it.

In four previous memoirs, Shapiro has reflected on her life, from her tumultuous upbringing in an Orthodox Jewish community to her most intimate relationships and her spiritual journeys. Her fifth memoir, *Inheritance* (reviewed on page 24), upends all she thought she knew about herself and her family, as she delves into her

surprising genetic origins and asks questions about identity, ancestry, and belonging.

Inheritance was inspired by my entirely accidental discovery of a huge family secret,” Shapiro told *Bookmarks*. “Through a commercial DNA testing kit, I found out that the dad who raised me was not my biological father. That discovery rocked my world, and, as a writer, I began researching, reporting, learning as much as I possibly could about the circumstances surrounding my conception. In

relation to my previous memoirs, *Inheritance* is the book in which all the windows were flung open, and the lights blinked on. The clarity was blinding at times—writing and living through this experience has been extraordinarily intense—and also profoundly liberating.”

Shapiro understands that we grow into multiple people over the course of our own lives while remaining, in certain ways, the same. After the publication of her second memoir, *Devotion* (2010), she was nervous about an appearance the next morning on a television show. She called a friend (the great Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein), who said to her, “Sweetheart, you’ve written a book about what you know now.” “That was such sage advice,” Shapiro told *Bookmarks*, “and, at the time, I understood it to mean that I’d know a little more later: in an hour, a day, a month, a year. But now I that I know *so* much more than I knew then, I realize that our lives, as we live them, are made up of memories that are constantly shifting and changing. So the idea that there is ever a definitive spot from which a life can be understood is, I think, to miss the point of the ever-evolving nature of consciousness and life itself.”

Inheritance, of course, altered Shapiro’s knowledge of where she came from, biologically speaking. “*Inheritance* changes absolutely everything—and also nothing—about my upbringing,” she said. “It was still my upbringing, as I lived it. But now it’s as if there’s a different lens on the whole thing. Who my parents were to me, and who I was to them? What did my dad know? What did they hide from me? And why? I spent my entire life, until the age of 54, not knowing who my biological father was, and not knowing that I didn’t know. At its core, *Inheritance* is about a recalibration, a remembering, a reunderstanding of who I am and where I come from.”

Shapiro, born in 1962 in suburban New Jersey, was raised in Orthodox Jewish household, with an adored father prone to panic attacks and a difficult mother. She found her childhood fraught with conflict, both familial and religious, themes that run throughout her fiction and her nonfiction. Brought up in a house divided, Shapiro found, “Observance (or lack thereof) was a central conflict of my early life. My parents fought constantly, a tug-of-war between my observant father and secular mother. And so of course it’s a part of my work, because I am my only instrument, and that instrument has been shaped by my history” (*The Nervous Breakdown*).

Shapiro attended Sarah Lawrence College, studying with Grace Paley, but dropped out to pursue an acting career and live the high life in Manhattan, where she quickly spiraled out of control. What gave renewed purpose to her life was a car accident that killed her father and shattered her mother’s body from head to toe, a tragedy she wrote about in her searing first memoir, *Slow Motion* (1998). By her 30s, Shapiro had returned to and completed college, was a recovering alcoholic, and had a newborn with a life-threatening illness. The tragedies of her 20s and 30s also made her a writer.

“Perhaps I would have become a writer, anyway, but I don’t know if I would have had the drive, the courage, the

awareness of life’s fragility, and honestly, the power of the grief driving me, and the desire to put language to it,” she told the *Huffington Post*. “... All these years later, I’m aware that much of my work has been an elegy, a way of honoring [my father].”

Before turning to memoir, Shapiro first embraced fiction.

“At this point I’ve now written an equal number of novels and memoirs (five of each), and I have a feeling that I was always digging for a secret without consciously knowing it,” Shapiro told *Bookmarks*. “Fiction allows you to do that. My novels are all about secrets, and the power of secrets. I didn’t know why—and now I do,” she said. “I imagine that the reason I turned from fiction to memoir is that, in some (again, unconscious) way, I knew that I needed to excavate more consciously, more directly, which is what memoir does.”

In her first novel, the semiautobiographical *Playing with Fire* (1990), published during graduate school, the blond, blue-eyed daughter of an Orthodox Jewish family has an affair with her college roommate’s powerful stepfather, who jumpstarts her acting career, until a family tragedy intervenes. After the novel’s publication, Shapiro “started realizing that the themes running through all of my novels were really haunting and obsessing me about my own life,” she told the *Independent* (UK). “I started to feel if I kept on writing novels and didn’t approach these themes head on, it might start adversely affecting my fiction.” So Shapiro turned to memoir.

Here we present Shapiro’s ever mutable and evolving life, as told through both fiction and nonfiction.

NOVELS

Family History (2003)

Published five years after her first memoir, *Slow Motion*, *Family History* is somewhat autobiographical in tone, as it examines the point at which a seemingly idyllic family made a wrong turn. About the corrosive power of guilt and shame, particularly in mothers, the novel was inspired by the maternal anxiety Shapiro experienced when her infant son became very ill.

Looking back, Rachel Jensen narrates a tale of family cracks and fissures. When Rachel and her husband, Ned, move from Greenwich



Village to Ned's suburban Massachusetts hometown, she leaves her overbearing, disapproving mother, and Ned relinquishes his artistic aspirations. They successfully brush away life's little disappointments, and when their previously well-behaved, straight-A daughter Kate starts to exhibit disturbing behavior, they attribute it to teen angst and their new baby. But then Kate has a terrifying incident, and life changes in an instant. It is "one of those books readers will finish in one sitting ... because it is so intense you can't take a break," wrote the *Detroit Free Press*. "In gripping, moving prose, Shapiro reminds us of any family's essential fragility, but also of the tenacious strength of love." (★★★★ July/Aug 2003)

Black & White (2007)

Shapiro's fifth novel, which draws on the controversies surrounding photographers like Sally Mann, depicts difficult mother-daughter bonds. "Once I was a mother myself, I found myself wondering, from the child's point of view, about how those photographs were composed and shot. I was unable to see them simply as beautiful, but also as possibly exploitative," she told *Literary Mama*.

Clara Brodeur, 32, happily married, lives with her husband and daughter in Maine. She has abandoned all traces of her former self—Clara Dunne—the subject of a series of suggestive black-and-white photographs taken by her mother, Ruth (loosely based on Sally Mann), during Clara's childhood. The provocative photos of naked Clara, controversial and hugely successful, elevated Ruth to the upper echelons of the New York art world—but caused deep resentment in Clara. When she learns that her mother is dying, Clara returns to Manhattan. Clara's absence unsettles her own daughter, who believes her grandmother was dead. Clara must address her relationship with her daughter, as she decides whether or not to forgive Ruth. "Shapiro forges a remarkably clear-eyed path through the issues at hand: mother-daughter love and loyalty, the limits of a parent's ownership of a child's privacy, the disclosure of family secrets to a new generation" (*Dallas Morning News*). (★★★★ July/Aug 2007)

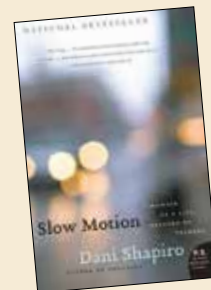


MEMOIRS

Slow Motion

A Memoir of a Life Rescued by Tragedy (1998)

Like the accident that defines *Family History*, Shapiro's first memoir divides up her life into Before and After. *Slow Motion* is an honest, cautionary tale of a nice girl gone bad, her wake-up call, and the excesses of 1980s Manhattan. "Shapiro's writing has the spare elegance of a thin, gold bracelet—with all the timeless appeal and elegance and fine craft that implies," *Salon* wrote. "*Slow Motion* illuminates the rocky road to integrity in graceful but wrenching steps."

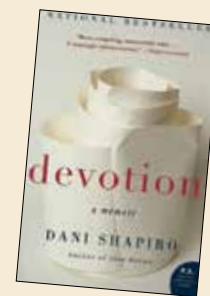


In the mid-1980s, when she was 23, Shapiro's parents were in a car accident in which neither was expected to survive. The crash, she writes, was a wake-up call to her "before and after" life. Raised in a tense, observant Jewish home in an affluent New Jersey suburb, Shapiro had dropped out of college to pursue an acting career—but it was all a sham. Rejecting her "good girl" upbringing, she became the mistress of a hotshot, married lawyer (her best friend's stepfather), who plied her with a Mercedes, a mink, trips to Europe, and a townhouse in Manhattan. To counteract this loss of personal control, Shapiro descended into substance abuse. Then the tragic call came, and suddenly her life had purpose. Though her father died, Shapiro became caretaker to her mother, entered a recovery program, returned to college, and wrote her first novel.

Devotion

A Memoir (2010)

Shapiro's second memoir picks up several narrative threads from *Slow Motion*. "In many ways, *Devotion* and *Slow Motion* are in dialogue for me," she told *The Nervous Breakdown*. "My forty-something self reaching out to my twenty-something self." Using her family history as the framework, she here explores her search for religion and spirituality. "Having been raised in a religious home, it felt transgressive to attempt to tackle belief as a subject," she told *Pen America*. "Who was I, after all? I felt I had no right to go there, but also that I had no choice." What results is an embrace of a hodgepodge of Judaism, Buddhism,



BOOKMARKS SELECTION



Inheritance

A Memoir of Genealogy, Paternity, and Love
By Dani Shapiro

THE TOPIC: In 2016, out of curiosity, Dani Shapiro took a DNA test. She expected to find her lineage consistent with the Ashkenazi Jewish family in which she was raised. But, to her surprise, she discovered that, instead of being the somewhat out-of-place, blond-haired and blue-eyed “father’s daughter,” her biological father was a Presbyterian doctor from Portland, and her entire life had been based on deception. “What potent combination of lawlessness, secrecy, desire, shame, greed, and confusion had led to my conception?” Shapiro asks, as she and her husband embark on a quest to uncover her genealogical roots. Her journey takes her to her family’s old rabbi, relatives, friends, and the unconventional fertility center visited by her parents. As she tries to come to terms with her new knowledge, Shapiro raises ethical questions about sperm donors, DNA testing, in vitro fertilization, privacy issues, and medical ethics. “All my life I had known there was a secret,” Shapiro writes. “What I hadn’t known: the secret was me.”



Knopf. 272 pages. \$24.95. ISBN: 9781524732714

Florida Times-Union ★★★★★

“As Shapiro seeks to redefine family in a way that’s relevant and honest, some of her lifelong relationships unravel. But other family ties weave new patterns, and these—braided with truth alongside sentiment—give her the strength to keep narrating an unknowable future.” ALISON BUCKHOLTZ

Minneapolis Star Tribune ★★★★★

“The reader experiences the grief, surprises and setbacks right along with the author. ... She juggles all of these threads and ... all of this overwhelming emotion quite deftly, while spinning the story out smoothly.” LAURIE HERTZEL

New York Times ★★★★★

“Shapiro’s account is beautifully written and deeply moving—it brought me to tears more than once. I couldn’t help feeling unnerved, though, by the strength of her conviction that blood will out, which leads her uncomfortably close to genetic determinism.” RUTH FRANKLIN

NPR ★★★★★

“Her prose is clear and often lovely, and her searching questions are unfailingly intelligent. She is not afraid to show herself in an unflattering light, which helps secure our trust.”

HELLER MCALPIN

Seattle Times ★★★★★

“Instead of taking up the wide-reaching subject whole cloth, *Inheritance* zooms in on the blind spots that result when reproductive technology outpaces an understanding of its consequences. In viewing this important and timely topic through a highly personal lens, *Inheritance* succeeds admirably.” ELLEN EMMY HELTZEL

USA Today ★★★★★

“She’s an excellent writer, and though the book is at times a little melodramatic, it’s smart, psychologically astute and not afraid to tell it like it is. If she’s just as happy not to be related to her half-sister Susie, if her mom is a ‘pathological narcissist with a borderline personality disorder,’ she has no problem saying so.” MARION WINIK

Washington Post ★★★★★

“Shapiro wrestles with questions both mundane and profound: how to get in touch with her biological father without scaring him away, how to share the news with her teenage son, how to look at old family photographs and understand her connection to the people in them, how to reconstruct, as she puts it, ‘the narrative edifice’ of her life. ... *Inheritance* is fundamentally a tale of soul-searching.” NORA KRUG

CRITICAL SUMMARY

“*Inheritance* reads like a mystery, unfolding minute by minute and day by day,” writes the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* about this highly emotional, true detective story filled with twists and turns. Once again, life has given Shapiro rich material to mine, but no matter how juicy the topic, she would be worth reading for her eloquence, empathy, and relatability. Here she intertwines two narratives: her need to know her biological father (with whom she eventually establishes a nice acquaintance), and her struggle to reconcile her genetic legacy with who she thought she was. Along the way, Shapiro asks but provides no easy answers to questions of reproductive medicine, the eugenics-laden early days of artificial insemination, sperm donors’ rights to privacy versus the rights of their offspring, and more. *Inheritance*, offers the *Washington Post*, “offers a thought-provoking look at the shifting landscape of identity. It will make you think twice before you casually spit into that vial.” ■

yoga philosophy, and thinkers, from Thomas Merton to Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Shapiro has a (third) husband she adores and a nice home in the Connecticut countryside; her son, who suffered from a life-threatening illness as a baby, is thriving at age 10; and her career has taken off. Yet though her fortunes have drastically improved since the events of *Slow Motion*, in midlife she is still a wreck. “Deep within my body, the past is still alive,” she writes. “Everything that has ever happened keeps happening.” As she searches for something to believe in—from a yogi, a Buddhist, and a rabbi, as well as from a gentler form of Judaism than that with which she was raised—she recalls painful stories from the past: her father’s influence and their rigid traditions; her attempt to reconcile with her ill mother; her son’s terrifying illness and her own anxiety and loneliness. From a place of shame, guilt, and pain, Shapiro starts to embrace the light. As *People* noted, “Thanks to Shapiro’s excruciatingly honest self-examination and crystal clear, lyrical writing ... the journey is indeed the reward.”

Still Writing

The Perils and Pleasures of a Creative Life (2013)

“Full of little meditations on the craft, this book takes on the highs and lows of the writing life—and deserves a spot on any writer’s desk,” wrote *Flavorwire*. *Still Writing*, a hybrid memoir and writing guide, joins some of the well-known books about the writing life, including Brenda Ueland’s *If You Want To Write*, Annie Dillard’s *The Writing Life*, and Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*.

Shapiro also instills this small book with lessons she learned during her spiritual journey. “Writing, after all, is an act of faith,” she says here.

“The only reason to be a writer,” Shapiro admits, is *because you have to*.” Dividing her book into Beginnings, Middles, and Ends, she offers advice on the writing process (such as how to deal with procrastination, self-doubt, discipline, the uncertainty of it all, and more). Throughout, she reflects on the experiences that influenced her own creative process, including her isolated childhood, her complicated relationship with her mother, and her father’s untimely death. She also offers lessons gleaned from her 20-plus years of teaching. Perhaps the greatest one? Be present. “Ideally,” Shapiro writes, “I want to be in both worlds: the one I’ve created in my mind, and also the one that’s all around me. Because if I’m present, I will



miss nothing. As writers, it is our job not only to imagine, but to witness.”

Hourglass

Time, Memory, Marriage (2017)

Shapiro intended to write another novel after *Still Writing*, but, instead, she once again found herself looking back at her life’s path—this time, the evolutions of her third marriage.

“That was a central preoccupation for me while I was writing *Hourglass*,” she told *Belletrist*, “the knowledge that two people simply must grow at different rates, and what happens when one path swerves away from another’s—and what you’re getting at here is an even deeper evocation of that. When we, over a period of years, come to see ourselves differently, or even become different, and that doesn’t jibe with the original tacit agreement or pact (or vows)—what do we do about that?”

Shapiro is 18 years into her third marriage, to Michael Maren, whom she calls “M.” A former war correspondent in Africa, he is now a screenwriter, and they live with their teenage son in Connecticut. The book moves fluidly between the past and the present, recalling how Shapiro and her husband first met (at a Manhattan cocktail party) and the many challenges they’ve weathered together, such as creative struggles, financial hardship, the loss of their parents, and their son’s early health scare. Amid the low points are euphoric highs, including their wedding and honeymoon in France. This sensitive, poetically written memoir reflects on the ways that a relationship changes over time, but it also celebrates what remains the same. “Reading *Hourglass* is like spying on the slow, intimate dance of two imperfect, well-intentioned humans, moving through their devotion and their doubts, riding the quotidian tides of passion and contentment and antipathy” (*Christian Science Monitor*). (★★★★ July/Aug 2017)



ON DANI SHAPIRO’S NIGHTSTAND

“Nicole Chung’s *All You Can Ever Know* is wonderful. And I loved Alexander Chee’s *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*. Also, Kristi Coulter’s essay collection, *No Good Can Come from This*. I’ve actually been reading more fiction lately, though: Sigrid Nunez’s *The Friend* and Idra Novey’s *Those Who Knew*.” ■