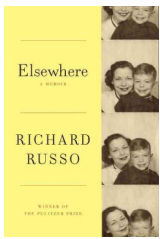


Bad Parent, Good Child



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I picked up Richard Russo's latest book with some hesitation. I knew *Elsewhere* was a memoir about his relationship with his mother, but I remembered that in his last novel, *That Old Cape Magic*, he had created a decidedly crazy "mother" character. But as is so often the case with memoirs, the first sentence hooked me.

Because he was an only child and his parents separated when he was very young, Russo and his mom shared an extremely close relationship. In the 50s she had a job for General Electric, dated engineers, and dressed elegantly. Her independence was extremely important to her, but it took Richard years to understand that she depended on her parents bail-outs to survive. It didn't help that Russo's dad contributed almost nothing to the household or that women were paid poor wages.

This book is also an exploration of a place - the town of Gloversville where Russo grew up and which he's fictionalized in his novels. It was a town built on making gloves; in fact, his grandparents did this. It was hard, polluting work and when the government cracked down on water pollution, the whole operation moved overseas. But in small-town Gloversville surrounded by relatives, Russo felt secure and loved.

Russo received a scholarship to the New York State college system but decided he could go to school cheaper out west. In his senior year, he was amazed when his mother approved this decision, and also allowed him to buy a car with his summer earnings. Shortly, before the big move, imagine his surprise when she informed that she would be coming with him. She told him that she had been offered a job with GE in Phoenix; he had enrolled at the University of Arizona. The description of their drive west in the "Grey Death", his big 1960 Ford Galaxie, was a hoot. His mother did not drive and Russo had gotten his license only two months before. Because the "Grey Death" had acceleration problems, the pair had to carefully select their exits based on the incline of the ramps.

When they finally reached Phoenix, Mom had some bad news. She didn't really have a job. The one she finally found was across the city from where she lived so Russo had to teach her to drive in a week. He imagined calling up his U. of A. advisor and telling him he would be late for the term because his Mom needed extra driving lessons.

In childhood, Richard recognized that his mother was different, had melt-downs often. When he was a boy, she relied on him to get through each day. The book describes their lives together until her death. She lived either with Russo and his wife and kids or nearby almost always. Plus, she was extremely demanding. Yet Richard remained loyal to her. If you find your relationship with a parent difficult, read *Elsewhere* about one on a completely different level. Yet Russo brings to this account, warmth, humor, and a can-solve attitude. How lucky Mrs. Russo was to have such a dedicated, generous son.

Another interesting memoir about a difficult parent is Jeanette Winterson's excellent *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*.

Posted by Dory L. on April 4, 2013

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