

## BOOK REVIEW

### THE GOOD POETIC MOTHER: A DAUGHTER'S MEMOIR

By Irene Hoge Smith

New York: International Psychoanalytic Books, 2021, 232 pages

The first impression this memoir makes is that it is a stunning account of childhood trauma and the power of introspection, the power of translating devastating pain into knowledge and strength, by virtue of thoughtfulness, by virtue of narrative, of providing language and structure that will eventually provide the remembering adult with the safety and understanding that the traumatized child needed and craved. Irene Hoge Smith has written a memoir that should be required reading for everyone who ever encounters a child, for people contemplating having children, for parents, for teachers, for caretakers, for psychoanalysts and other psychotherapists. Hoge Smith speaks for the child, because she was the child for whom she speaks today.

Telling the story of childhood and parenthood in the pages of this book required first and foremost courage, accompanied by artistry, empathy, and necessity. This story affirms what should be obvious, and yet is too easily overlooked and forgotten, the complexity of a child's need for a loving parent, the child's love for family members, and the child's need for validation of the child's own identity, the very fact of being.

What, then, is the story? The story is told by the author of this book, who is the eldest of four daughters born to an educated, cultured, comfortably middle-class, politically progressive, seemingly enlightened family, to Mama and Daddy. Mama and Daddy were Frances Dean Smith and Wray Smith.

The four daughters, in birth order, are the two eldest, Patti and Irene, and then the two youngest, Sara and Ruthie.

Who is "the good poetic mother" of the book's title? She is Mama, Frances Dean Smith, the mother of the four daughters she had with her husband Wray Smith, and a poet,

who claimed her destiny to become who she thought she was, a poet, a poet who eventually became known as FrancEyE.

What word or words is/are modified by the adjective “good”? Was she good at being poetic? Was she a good mother?

A good mother? The memoir speaks for Irene, telling us of Irene’s early childhood, of the various places she lived, the various relatives with whom she lived, her parents’ divorce in 1960. So far, it is clear that there were difficulties, upheavals, in the lives of the four sisters. Was there severe trauma? No suspense needed in the review of this memoir: Yes, there was severe trauma.

First, Irene’s first memory, 1950: “My big sister had been right there, and then she wasn’t, and outside, down on the sidewalk, someone was screaming” (page 14). She was two years old, and Patti was four years old. The two sisters, and their two parents, were living in Irene and Patti’s grandmother’s house. Patti fell from the window and wound up with a broken arm and a broken leg. In the next two pages, we learn that the story Irene had heard about how Patti fell from the window was not the full story that four-year-old Patti remembered. The story told was that the two girls had been playing tag, and Patti ran into the window screen and the window screen fell out. But Patti remembered her father being angry at the two girls, that her right arm was broken, and her left leg was broken, but that her right arm already was broken when she fell from the window. We are left with the impression that her father brutalized her, broke her arm, and then threw her out of the window.

That was a first memorable trauma, but not the central trauma that is at the core of this memoir. In the early 1960’s, the parents divorced. The good poetic mother left the four sisters with their father, to travel to California, to find herself, her true poetic self, to meet Charles Bukowski, whose poetry she admired and whom she idealized. She indeed met Bukowski, wrote poetry, created a poetic identity, FrancEye, married Bukowski, and they had a daughter together, Marine Louise.

*The Los Angeles Times* obituary of the poet known as FrancEye, Frances Dean Smith Bukowski, June 21, 2009, says that she said of Bukowski that “he gave her the courage to devote her life and her energies to poetry”.

This is what totally appalls me, since that “courage” caused grievous harm to her four abandoned daughters, which Irene Hoge Smith so brilliantly reveals in her memoir. I too knew a few women in the 1960’s who “left” their children in the care of others to “find themselves”. In the 1960’s, I too had children, three young children, and I too was a poet, and a fiction writer, and I too dedicated myself to writing poetry and fiction, but it never would have occurred to me to leave my children. Their father had already abandoned them to pursue his writing career, and, incidentally, move in with his pregnant girlfriend, whom he then abandoned when she was eight months pregnant. I was in my early, and then mid-20’s, and I knew all too well the devastation an abandoning parent causes. I certainly had my flaws, made many mistakes, but abandoning children was a mistake I never would make. I know it takes courage to raise children, no matter what else the seeking heart and mind and soul would like to do. Thus, reading this memoir, I was broken-hearted for this thoughtful, courageous memoirist, for the child she was, for her three siblings, for the grief that the “good poetic mother” created as she pursued finding her poetic self.

There is a great deal of “what happened next” in this remarkable book. So lets skip ahead to adulthood (we can skip back to childhood!), to acknowledge that Irene Hoge Smith became a psychologist! Her life of trauma, abandonment, loss, informed her seeking self about the inner world of others. She is capable of true empathy, for everyone in her family, her mother, her father, her grandparents, her siblings, and beyond family, for people.... She has the inner strength, the true capacity, to be both a practicing clinician, and a writer. She has learned to be true to herself, and not define herself by what others are.

“I am a clinical psychologist, and I had just finished the second year of a three-year writing program at my local psychoanalytic institute. I’d worked through my resistance to being a writer like my mother (a poet who only came into her creative life after she left), and was reluctantly beginning to recognize that the book I needed to write was about her” (p. 3).

We are so fortunate that that Hoge Smith became a clinician, and that she worked through that resistance, giving us this profound book. I believe her statement that the book she “needed to write was about her”, was about her mother, but for me the book is very much about the traumatized child, and her traumatized siblings, the traumatized child who became a clinician and a writer. She bears witness! She has done what Eli Wiesel has done when he wrote about the Holocaust. We should cherish his words of wisdom, “Human suffering anywhere concerns men and women everywhere”.

Part of Hoge Smith’s suffering was the discovery, in adolescence, that her mother was mentally ill, that her mother was considered mentally ill by others, but that she did not experience her mother in that way. Her older sister Patti had run away from home. Her father was selfishly negligent. She was the designated caretaker of her two younger sisters. She writes of herself, at age 14: “She was alone, didn’t know where her mother was, soon would not know where her older sister had gone, either. Her father was seldom present, and, worst of all, she didn’t really know where her little sisters were much of the time, and she was supposed to be in charge of them. Her life had undergone a radical discontinuity, shocking her into a kind of stasis in which she couldn’t talk or think. The woman I am now still has trouble finding the narrative thread” (page 104). We are privileged to be drawn into the inner world of the woman she is now, the woman who remembers severe past trauma, who has “trouble finding the narrative thread”, but who has carefully woven a remarkable memoir out of the narrative thread she finds.

She writes of shock, of persistent amnesia. Her mother told her that she had to go, that she was leaving, and the adolescent girl was shocked into being unable to remember....

She writes of wandering. She says of her adolescent self, “I have no idea what she was thinking”. And yet, the clinical psychologist she now is continues, “Wandering is a characteristic of psychogenic fugue, a psychiatric state involving depersonalization, derealization, and pervasive amnesia” (page 106).

Trauma after trauma piles up, family deaths, discoveries of past events. Yet we have a clear sense that for all the pain, Hoge Smith is not broken. She gives.

At times, when I read about events in her childhood, I envied her. I envied her! She knew Pete Seeger! I envied the cultural environment! Even as I learned of all the trauma she experienced, I envied what she had that was special. And, as I experienced the envy, I also could not begrudge her any joy, any joyous memory, anything valuable in her life. I could value my own life, and I could hope for her that she could find everything she could find to value in her own life.

What she has of value in her own life is herself. She has her courage, her integrity, her insight, her talent, her open heart, her ability to give to others, as a clinician and as a writer. I feel honored to have known her in this way, through her writings, through the gift of this book.

Merle Molofsky