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Not Her Father's Girl

*Bliss Broyard writes
her own stories*

By Paul Zakrzewski

A writer once remarked that all writing is autobiographical, if only because the writer has lived through the experience of the writing itself. It's a sneaky definition, but one I tell myself to remember as I arrive at an empty bar in the East Village to meet Bliss Broyard.

Several of the stories in Broyard's first collection, "My Father, Dancing," focus on the shifting dynamics between charismatic (and somewhat cruel) fathers and their wary daughters. It's tempting to see these stories as autobiographical. After all, the 32-year-old writer is the daughter of Anatole Broyard, an editor of the New York Times Book Review and one of America's most charismatic and influential literary critics. She has also written about her relationship with her father in the realm of non-fiction. For a memoir anthologized in the 1998 collection *Personals*, Broyard explored how her dad's death, and the maturing friendships she's developed with his old circle, have opened her to a more complicated version of a man she thought she knew.

In that essay, "My Father's Daughter," she describes a recurring feeling that arises from those visits: "I remember thinking that rather than having a unique personality, I was merely an assemblage of reactions, a mosaic of agreements and disagreements with my dad — a feeling that has reoccurred intermittently since. I keep hoping to find the line where he stops and I begin."

Distinguishing the line between self and family, lining these contours of selfhood, also underpins much of the action in "My Father, Dancing." The young women and girls of these eight stories uncover adultery, lies and secrets, or else subject themselves to compromising situations, discovering who

they want to be in the process. At their best, these unpretentious and well-crafted stories articulate the painful movement towards knowledge and experience with sheer clarity and grace.

"Mr. Sweetly Indecent," which first appeared in last year's "Best American Short Stories," is one example. In this story, a father's adulterous affair is juxtaposed against the narrator's own, a parallel that helps the story achieve a disquieting subtlety. Though the story's narrator feels as if her father's adulterous relationship has changed everything she knew to be true about her family, she herself willingly participates in an affair that also wreaks havoc with her identity.

Similarly, several of the young women in this collection seem to want some resolution in the relationship with their fathers. Ironically, these fathers seem paternal in a rather fleeting and unsatisfactory way: protective, loving, but patronizing. "I do think there's this urge for a lot of young women to look to older men, fathers, for affirmation, but ultimately it's not a resolvable situation," Broyard explains.

Like the narrator of "Mr. Sweetly Indecent," not all the main characters in this collection are innocents, though their actions always lead them to a new, if disturbing, sense of self. In another story, "Ugliest Faces," a young woman accidentally hits a fraternity jock with her car. The boy is drunk and not badly hurt and when he gets up he makes a lecherous advance towards the driver. Because the woman refuses to report the accident, she gets inevitably drawn towards a second, more ominous encounter with the young man — which doesn't end as

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the reader might expect. It's the precision with which Broyard charts this new emotional terrain and the price the character pays for her culpability that make "Ugliest Faces" such a surprise.

Of course, to read "My Father, Dancing" as thinly-veiled autobiography is to dismiss a sharp and original talent. These stories may be inspired by life events, but they move and shift in ways that only exquisitely crafted fiction can. This process of fiction is something Broyard feels impelled to explain.

"There's this somewhat uncomfortable experience — in reviews of your writing and in interviews — of people reading a lot into you personally," she says. "Once the stories are finished, they take on a life of their own, they are separate from you. But people are constantly dragging them back to you and saying, 'well what does this say about you?' And I feel like saying, 'well, since you're having this response, what does it say about you?'"

She continues: "Usually I start with a situation or image that's compelling to me," she explains. "I keep picking at it and wondering

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Close up

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

why this resonates for me. And the answer lies in my imagination, not in my experience. I think the truth of experience is what you're feeling about it, what you took away from it, not what actually happened."

It might be more accurate, then, to consider these stories — the way all good stories are — emotional autobiography at best. Broyard points to the title story from the collection, which stemmed from the complicated feelings surrounding her father's death, as an example of the process.

"We get so selfish when someone's dying," she says. "As a child, you want so much affirmation from your parents. But it just doesn't happen like that. The child is wanting affirmation; the person who's sick is wanting to live or wanting to be comfortable, or else having their own musings about whether they've living a valuable life."

"I think I was frustrated by this impulse

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I kept having to have the final hours define our entire relationship," she continues. "I was, in a way, failing my father by letting these last hours define us. Because we had a whole history before that, and this was a totally unusual, artificial situation. That wasn't the way we spoke to each other. We spoke to each other on the dance floor."

Dancing is a central image in much of Broyard's writing, and there's little wonder that it appeared in the book's title. She says it resonates a lot with her as a way of looking at writing: "When a story is working, it's a lot about a rhythm. There's a sense of rightness that I feel on the dance floor — you can't really articulate it, but you just know when something feels right in your bones — and I find a similar experience when I'm working on fiction," she says. "It just feels good."

The image of dancing also occurs in her stories because it's a strong image of grace for the young self-conscious women who populate her stories: "You can't be a good dancer if you're too self-conscious," Broyard points out. "There was, at least in my growing up, a sense that dancing was very freeing, a place where people weren't that self-conscious."

If our discussion about fiction and life reminds me that her stories aren't what they appear to be at first, then Broyard herself comes across much the same way. In person she looks much less like the polished publishing type who graces her book's dust-jacket flap. She's more relaxed and yet self-contained, more like the tomboyish young women who narrate her stories. Like those women, Broyard possesses a kind of shrewd self-awareness which transcends gender.

And while her father's connections to the world of publishing have clearly helped Broyard, it's more likely that this shrewdness — not to mention the stories themselves — that have sealed her first success. "My Father, Dancing," the first story she ever published, went on to win a prestigious Pushcart award a few years ago. At the time, her talent caught the notice of a New York editor, and she was approached about publishing a collection. Though Broyard didn't have much work at the time, she sent the agent several stories after completing a fellowship at the University of Virginia. These stories comprise about half of the current collection.

Broyard says she turned down the traditional two-book offer — "I only had half of 'My Father, Dancing' done, and didn't want to have the next three years planned out so much" — but she admits she's attracted to the idea of doing a novel. "It's exciting to live with characters for a long period of time, and there's just so much more possibility in the novel ... In short stories you have to limit yourself. It can't be that tangential, and everything needs to relate to the story that you're trying to tell. I do enjoy, in novels, the sidelines people take, and I'm excited to try that myself."