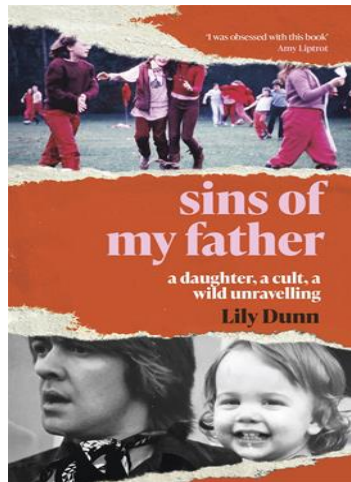


BOOK REVIEW: SINS OF MY FATHER: A DAUGHTER, A CULT, A WILD UNRAVELLING



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When Lily Dunn was just six years old, her father left the family home to follow his guru to India, trading domestic life for clothes dyed in oranges and reds and the promise of enlightenment with the cult of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. Since then he has been a mystery to her. She grew up enthralled by the image of him; effervescent, ambitious and elusive, a writer, publisher and entrepreneur, a man who would appear with gifts from faraway places, and with whom she spent the long, hot summers of her teenage years in Italy, in the company of his wild and wealthy friends. Yet he was also a compulsive liar, a delinquent, a man who abandoned his responsibilities in a pursuit of transcendence that took him from sex addiction, via the Rajneesh cult, to a relentless chase of money, which ended in ruin and finally addiction to alcohol and prescription drugs.

A detective story that charts two colliding narratives, *Sins of My Father* is a daughter's attempt to unravel the mysteries of a father who believed himself to be beyond reproach. A dazzling work of literary memoir, it asks how deep legacies of shame and trauma run, and if we can reconcile unconditional love with irreparable damage.

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Structure

One of the key characters that frequently haunts the pages of memoirs is the father. The writers of these confessional texts look at their fathers from diverse perspectives, but the most popular one is the psychoanalytical one. In doing so, they attempt to examine the impacts of their fathers' deeds and worldviews on their children. The influences can be either beneficial or pernicious and at times an admixture of them. The authors' responses towards their fathers can range from sympathy, love, and understanding to indignation, hatred, and complaint. When the memoirist is female, she is uniquely well-equipped to scrutinize her father in great depth and capture the subtle nuances of his identity. This can be partly attributed to the natural attachment and instinctive love of daughters toward their fathers. Lily Dunn's *Sins of My Father* is no exception. In her memoir, Dunn sincerely studies her father and reflects on his selfish acts causing emotional traumas to his immediate family. She peels off the secret layers of her father's life to vainly exorcise her father's ghost from her soul because she believes that she is entrapped in her father. In this memoir, which is written painstakingly and with admirable honesty, she writes about his father's success and downfall, quixotic plans, the abandonment of his family, his betrayals, alcohol addiction, unfulfilled desire to be a novelist, his regression to childhood in his middle age, and eventually his lonely death. The memoirist also vividly portrays her father's counter-culture life in India, New York, and Italy when he is under the cultish spell of his Indian guru known as Osho or Bhagwan. As a dutiful daughter, she demonstrates her loyalty to her father despite his villainous indifference to his family and her throughout his life. Moreover, her memoir provides a glimpse of the writer's own life for her readers. To write her memoir, Lily Dunn borrows from William Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot, Ted Hughes, Roland Barthes, Greek mythology, Indian philosophy, Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, other modern psychologists, movies, and documentaries.

In doing so, she renders her memoir scholarly and the process of reading for her readership pleasant and fruitful.

Content

Dunn divides her memoir into ten chapters. In each chapter, she embarks on narrating and analyzing the main events in his father's life as well as her own life. She also shines a light on the consequences of his father's decisions and deeds and the way she and her family react to them.

Dunn entitles the first chapter 'Exile' in which she concentrates on the damaging impact of attending a boarding school on his father when he is only seven years old. By severing him from the warmth and bliss of home and enrolling him in boarding school, his parents, the memoirist thinks, send him into forced exile. At boarding school, the young, sensitive student experiences sexual abuse and remains reticent about it. He carries the pandemonium of his traumatic days at the boarding school to their home. It is no coincidence that he ruins his sister's innocence. Nonetheless, it does not damage the intimacy between the siblings. His father hopes that his son will get a good education and an appropriate job, but his dream does not materialize. The author attributes his father's failure in his later life to his bitter experience at the boarding school. She supports her claim by capitalizing on the views of psychologists that have investigated the adverse effect of boarding schools on young students.

The title of the second chapter is 'adultery.' It reveals how his father contaminates and adulterates the sanctity of his marriage in the early stage of his married life. His first adultery occurs as he secretly makes love to his American girlfriend in London. The illicit relationship develops when he flies to the USA to spend more time with her. Hiding his real motive, he deceives his family into believing that he is visiting her sister, recently married to an American artist. Stricken with remorse, he later confesses to his trusting wife who relents and forgives him. But his previous remorse does not deter him from his second adulterous affair. It takes place when the writer's mother is pregnant with her. The author's mother employs an antenatal teacher so that she can have an easy delivery with their second child. Her mother not only trusts her teacher but also treats her as her sister.

On the contrary, her teacher sleeps with her father while she is giving birth to her baby in the hospital and waiting for her husband to arrive and appreciate their newly born baby girl.

His father keeps the affair secret, but her mother discovers it after many years. The author is of opinion that her father has a split character since he simultaneously betrays his wife and loves her. Besides adultery, the memoirist dwells on her maternal parents, her childhood, fond memories, her parents' wedding ceremony, their trip to Greece, and her father's blooming publishing company. When she relates these events, she refers to their family album. By juxtaposing her sweet childhood memories with her father's adultery, the writer makes her memoir poignant.

In the third chapter, Lily Dunn describes how her father abandons his family home and travels to the alternative world of India to be part of the Rajneesh movement established by Osho (Bhagwan) who preaches free love, disdains the family ties, and promises his Western followers to liberate them from oppressive bourgeois selves. He genuinely believes his guru's words. Thus, he does not feel guilty about abdicating his family responsibilities resulting in the loss of his publishing company and its bankruptcy. His narcissistic escape makes his wife cope with enormous financial and family stress. After six months, he returns with his young girlfriend to England, thinking he is enlightened while the other is unenlightened. Their stay in London is not long because they travel to Oregon in the US to join Osho's new commune. The memoirist in this section rebukes Sheela, Osho's secretary and the mastermind of the commune construction in Oregon for dismissing the local people as yokels and the uneducated, for promoting violence, cultivating the culture of control and fear, and for silencing her opponents with poison and drugs. Unable to finance their stint in Oregon, the lovers come back to England and rent a house in London. Once more in England, they follow their unorthodox life in a commune called Media. He sometimes takes his children at the weekends to Medina where the memoirist and his brother observe how members and their children freely talk about sex and engage in sexual affairs.

The fourth chapter deals with paternal betrayal. Following the collapse of the commune of Medina in England, her father travels to Tuscany in Italy where he rents a villa and marries a like-minded beautiful eighteen-year-old girl.

There, he establishes his small free-loving commune and engages in publishing and writing books.

The writer and her brother join his father in Italy during the summer holidays. Naturally, she becomes jealous of her young stepmother who is the epicenter of his father's attention. She desperately yearns for her father's love and admits that she has suffered from 'father fixation.' She thinks her father has to be her lover rather than a caring father. Since her father does not nurture her with the desired paternal love, she seeks her desired love in others. Unbelievably, her young stepmother encourages her to enter into a relationship with older people on the grounds of their wisdom and maturity. It is worth noting that among the followers of Osho or Bhagwan, the love between a teenage girl and a grown-up is admissible. Thus, as soon as she strikes the eyes of her father's friend, she accepts his love, hoping to find her father in his arms, words, and body. But after some time, her old lover repels her, thus, she asks him to go away and leave her alone. When she finds out that her father has intentionally been indifferent toward her seduction by his friend, she feels that her father has betrayed her. Accordingly, she accuses her father of abdicating his responsibility. She also attacks the disciples of Osho (known as Sannyasins) for not protecting their vulnerable children against predatory and problematic relationships that can be traumatic in the future. Nevertheless, she still loves her father.

The main concern of the memoirist in the fifth chapter is not her father, but her relationships, grandmother, mother, exams, modeling, interest in painting, and the return of his father to London. The writer commences the chapter by relating her immature relationship with a thirty-two-year-old hairdresser-cum-womanizer who lauds her blonde hair and deflowers her despite her mother's discouragement and warnings, and curfew at home. She breaks off her relationship with him when she finds that the hairdresser has already impregnated his American girlfriend and kept ignoring her. Then, she befriends the Great Dane, a big-boned man, who owns a music studio. He introduces her to drugs and takes her to music festivals in England and Europe. She views him as her protector; however, she ends this relationship. She touches on it in the next chapter. Moreover, she familiarizes her readership with her maternal grandmother whose gusto for life and exuberant character the writer praises.

She links her passionate enthusiasm for life to her carefree childhood in South Africa. She believes that her mother inherited her resourcefulness and resilient character from her mother.

Thanks to her mother's support, she passes her A-level exam in English and Art despite her failure in other subjects. Before entering the university, she stayed with a good-natured artist, her mother's friend. She poses as a model for his Victorian paintings and accompanies him in his daily walking. Furthermore, she practices painting in his studio. Indeed, her stint with the kind artist is the most useful and least turbulent period in her life. At the end of the chapter, her father and new young wife return to London. Her stepmother who is only some years the writer's senior envies her freedom, appearance, and clothes. She also complains about the possessiveness of her husband.

In the sixth chapter, the writer focuses on her friendship, her father's luxurious life in the US, and her hospitalization after breaking her leg on the beach. In this section, the memoirist touch on the Great Dane, her boyfriend once more, explaining how they drift from one music festival to another and how they indulge in taking pills, drugs, and alcohol. She admits her life in her presence with him was meaningless and she has lost control of her life. To get away from him, the writer betrays him and leaves him despite his devotion to her. She connects her infidelity to her father's unfaithfulness. Then, she relates her reviewing job in a magazine and her friendship with Astra. They befriend Joe and the Viking, a worker in the oil rig. She becomes drawn to the Viking despite catching him kissing and hugging Astra. At Christmas time, she travels to join her father and stepmother who have recently received their US Green Cards and residency thanks to their successful publishing business. She shed light on her parents' extravagant lifestyle in California, the exaggeration of their European sophistication, their bohemian society, and her father's possessiveness toward his young wife who is keen on socializing. While in the US, the writer introduces the Viking to her father whom he does not approve of; she attributes it to his selfishness and inferiority complex. Back in London, she takes up running, wishing to be as fit as the Viking. The serious incident in this chapter is related to the fracture of her leg during Joe's annual beach party. It occurs at night as she tears herself away from the party and walks along the beach.

In pitch darkness, she inadvertently places her foot in the netting-wire snare and immediately falls, resulting in breaking her leg. It is her mother that looks after her in the hospital rather than her friends who are too concerned with their beach party to visit her. She names the chapter 'Abyss' to accentuate her closeness to death.

In the seventh chapter, the memoirist brings to the fore her father's stupidity. Six years after her bitter incident at the beach, her father's second wife leaves him, and he consoles himself with excessive alcohol consumption and the friendship of an alcoholic butcheress. The writer believes her father's alcohol consumption has rendered him gullible. This explains why he easily falls prey to a scam by Russians. Her father receives an email from some Russians, supposedly lawyers, in which they claim that he is the sole inheritor of his distant cousin. To make their design seem real, they buy him a plane ticket to London as well as book him a room in an expensive hotel. Her father hopes to be rich, so he travels to London and pays \$ 50000 to the Russians so that they will speed up the process of receiving his large inheritance. Even though the writer and her brother warn him about the Russians' outright deception, their father ignores their warnings. Soon after the loss of his money, he shamefully flies to the US without informing his children.

In the eighth chapter, the writer gives an account of her wedding ceremony held in her mother's house. His father promises to pay for her wedding expenses, but he fails to honor his promise due to his messy life in the US. He can only attend the wedding party with his disheveled hair and scruffy appearance, preferring to be alone. When she is on her honeymoon, she gets an email in which the butcheress requests the writer and her brother to look after their father whose neck is damaged due to falling down the stairs. She travels to the US without a second thought. She is secretly happy, thinking she will love her father without any rivals. Here she finds the distant echo of Myrrha's incestuous relationship in loving her father. She also censures his father in the light of Jung's perspective. According to Jung, human beings in the second part of their lives attain maturity, individuation, and integrity but her father in this stage has only generated wreckage which his children should clean up.

In the ninth chapter, not only does the memoirist delineate her father's addiction to alcohol but also demonstrates how his alcoholism corrodes his life.

The siblings have flown to Bolinas, a coastal community in California, to rehabilitate him in the alcohol unit. To their chagrin, he vehemently denies his alcohol problems. They find their father lonely, sick, abandoned, shrunken, and toothless. He is mired in dirt and financial mess, unaware of the world around him.

Unable to appreciate his children's nursing and attention, he demands his children must leave him alone. Her father's lamentable condition propels her to reflect on the catastrophic consequence of his addiction. She shows how his father's alcohol abuse robs his rational faculty and transforms him into a child unable to clean himself and intake his food. When their efforts to save him have proved futile, they fly back to London. Soon after, he becomes deported from the U.S. In England, the writer and his brother hospitalize him in a cottage hospital where he dies, and whose funeral only the writer and her family attend.

In the last chapter, the writer touches on her divorce. To cope with the pain of her divorce, she volunteers to teach creative writing to those recovering from their alcohol addiction. Among her students, Susie with her talent catches her attention. In the writing class contrary to her deeply-held belief, Susie discovers that she writes well in her sobriety. At the end of her literary memoir, Lily Dunn finally forgives her father and his sins, believing he has been misunderstood. Reflecting on her father's life makes her take a new direction in her life to live and love sincerely and engage productively with others. In other words, she wants to live meaningfully.

Future

This literary memoir is written from the perspective of a devoted daughter seeking to come to terms with her father's narcissistic life and wrongdoings. Reading it is highly recommended to fathers and would-be fathers because it will enlighten them about the delicate world of their daughters and how their missteps and irresponsibility can cause irreparable psychological trauma. Furthermore, reading the book will inform the father how their sobriety, full responsibility, and affection will be invaluable emotional assets in the lives of their daughters. The memoir reminds us that fathers should lay a sturdy foundation for their families and shun self-centeredness.

Nevertheless, the fathers are not the only target audience of the memoir; the book can be enjoyed by anyone. This has been successful in achieving its goals because she backs her views by drawing on the world of psychology, literature, mythology, cinema, and direct observation of fellow human beings. She does it gracefully through her lucid and engaging prose.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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