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'Welcome to Hell': Writing Parents, Parenting Writers

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“Welcome to Hell”: Writing Parents, Parenting Writers

READING FRANZ WRIGHT’S OBITUARY in the *New York Times* last year, I was struck by an anecdote about how the Pulitzer Prize winner came to be a poet. When Franz, at fourteen, completed his first poem, he immediately showed it to his father, James Wright, the famed poet and, long before his son, a fellow Pulitzer Prize winner. Wright’s response was not to pat his boy on the back or tussle his hair, or display the poem above his desk at work, as other dads might do. Rather, in the face of his son’s nascent talent, James Wright reportedly declared, “I’ll be damned. You’re a poet. Welcome to hell.”

His response has come to mind a lot lately. My husband and I, both mid-career writers, are raising an aspiring poet and essayist who, at sixteen, has already published in journals that routinely reject us, and racked up more award money for his writing than both of us *combined*. Are we proud? You bet. But we are also, like James Wright, a little apprehensive. There is a learning curve to parenting any teenager, but I had assumed that at this point, we’d be spending time talking about bullies and the occasional bad grade—not about the family member who took issue with our son’s characterization of him in print, threatening to write a letter to the journal’s editor. I figured I’d be worrying about girlfriends, not the solicitations of editors and, in turn, the form letter rejections that I reassure him are *normal*.

I’m not trying to boast but to brace myself for the tricky waters we are already learning to navigate. As exciting as his early success has been, it comes at a time in his young life when feelings of self-consciousness and vulnerability are already heightened. And that’s not counting the impending economic toil he’ll

face as a writer; the sheer competitiveness (and with it, the often toxic culture) of writing programs; and, in the face of all these pressures and struggles, the temptation to self-medicate with booze, drugs, casual sex. How does a parent resist fears of addiction, alcoholism, anxiety, and depression that all too often color the writing life—sometimes made worse by success?

Welcome to hell.

Of course, I am not the first parent to experience this unique set of concerns. Literary history is populated with plenty of notable parent-and-child writers, across the years (Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley; Andre Dubus II and Andre Dubus III, to name a few)—which is not to place my own parent-child relationship in such renowned company. Rather, I'm seeking to explore the unique patterns and themes that emerge where parenthood and the profession of writing intersect. What are the inherent privileges and problems that mark such relationships? How do they develop? To what extent does the parent-writer cast both a shadow and a light on the child's career—and vice versa? How do they negotiate the complicated feelings toward appearing, as characters, in each other's work? Finally—and most important—how do they protect their relationship from all of this potential conflict?

Dogged by these questions, I recently picked up the biographies and memoirs of three contemporary parent-and-child writer duos: James and Christopher Dickey; Alice and Sheila Munro; and Alice and Rebecca Walker.¹ All three cases, like any parent-child relationship, are fully unique in their circumstances and dynamics, but examined collectively, it's impossible to overlook a few running themes and common denominators: 1) the writer's strong ambivalence toward having children, in the first place, for the threat they pose to one's career—and, in turn, the threat that such a career imposes on the son's or daughter's sense of security and well-being; 2) the pressure the son or daughter feels to emulate the parent's literary success while forging his/her own writing career; and 3) one or both parties' attempts to reconcile their mutual hurt—or not—resulting in further fodder for writing.

Is it possible for parent-and-child writers, no matter their respective levels of success, to avoid any or all the tendencies outlined above? Is there a good model for such a relationship—one that strikes a healthy balance between the

1. To avoid confusion over the inherent duplication of names here, I'll be using the parent-writers' last names, while referring to their sons and daughters by their first names.

commitments to family and to making art; one that is mutually supportive of both enterprises, so much, perhaps, that they are actually *enhanced* by each other? This essay is a kind of case study, testing these questions against three of literature's more recent and prominent examples.

THE WORK OF PARENTING VS. THE WRITER'S WORK

IN A DISCUSSION LIKE THIS, one can't avoid the frequent feelings of ambivalence, anxiety, even antagonism, that many writers—especially women—admit to having toward the daily duties and disruptions that parenthood imposes on their careers. Of course, writers are hardly alone in those feelings (show me a

parent and a working professional who isn't more than a *little* harried, juggling the two), and, no doubt, there are plenty of writers (probably reading this) who would find the opposition too easy and reductive, perhaps even contradictory to their experience. To be sure, all of the writers mentioned in this essay have acknowledged, at one time or another, the ways in which parenthood has *enriched* their work with a profoundly different perspective towards the human condition.

Be that as it may, shifting beneath this universal truth is a far less romantic set of politics. For the privileged (read "white") woman writer who attempted a career before the Women's Liberation movement hit full swing in the late 1960s and 70s, having children brought with it a surprising and pragmatic upshot: the means to stay home

and write. In *Lives of Mothers & Daughters: Growing Up with Alice Munro*, Sheila Munro makes it clear from the outset that her mother, the famous Canadian short story writer and Nobel Prize winner, never saw motherhood as an affront

Walker's determination to be a writer first, and *then* a mother, was anathema in a time and culture in which black women had little choice but to support themselves by caring for people's—usually white people's—children.

to her career, even in the conservative era of the 1950s; rather, domestic life was something of a protective screen behind which she could write safely and inconspicuously. Converting her laundry room into a writing space (where she wrote the popular novel *Lives of Girls and Women*), Alice Munro reconciled her writing life to the daily domestic chores that offered her just the right meditative headspace required for her to produce some of her best work. Her daughter explains, “She wanted a conventional life that included a husband and children, and beyond that she needed some kind of protective camouflage to conceal her raw ambition from the rest of the world. She never could have imagined going off to Paris and declaring herself a writer the way Mavis Gallant did. For her that would’ve been *sheer folly*, a dangerous exposure” [emphasis mine].

Funny that the word *folly* should come up. While domesticity provided the perfect sanctuary for Alice Munro to write, for Alice Walker, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and social activist, it was a prison from which she fought to break free. And that meant continually resisting the trap of what Walker calls “Women’s Folly,” that set of patriarchal values and assumptions that women internalize about the traditional roles they’re expected to play. In her essay “One Child of One’s Own,” Walker dismisses both the notion that in order for a woman to achieve literary acclaim and legitimacy, she must remain childless—as the canon, at that time, suggested—and any implication, even from her well-intentioned mother, that women should grow large families and avoid “plan[ning] their lives for periods longer than nine months.” In short, she rejects any ideology—“Women’s Folly” or otherwise—that would dictate her personal and professional choices.

Walker’s progressiveness may not seem that remarkable today, but her determination to be a writer first, and *then* a mother, was anathema in a time and culture in which black women had little choice but to support themselves by caring for people’s—usually white people’s—children. Not Alice Walker. She sent Rebecca, at only eighteen months old, toddling by herself down the street to a neighbor’s nursery school so that Walker could turn her focus back to writing. As her biographer, Evelyn C. White, notes in *Alice Walker: A Life*, this was hardly the norm—a woman “dispatching her toddler to nursery school because of a *novel*? It was an act scarcely conceived, let alone realized for black women.”

Fiercely protective of her writing time, Walker “require[d] an absolutely quiet and private place to work (preferably with a view of a garden),” where she could hear clearly the voices of her characters, her *ancestors*, whispering their stories. Secure in her identity as a serious writer, Walker felt no compunction about leaving Rebecca with babysitters and neighbors (far better, she reasoned, than with an “abstracted, harassed adult”). And when that wasn’t enough, she escaped to the quiet countryside home she rented a hundred miles from San Francisco, while Rebecca stayed behind.

Rebecca would later document this lonely time in the 2001 memoir *Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*. The book opens with her early memories of growing up “a movement child,” the biracial daughter of two civil rights activists (Alice Walker and Mel Levanthal met while working for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund) determined to marry and live in the Jim Crow South when lynching was ubiquitous and interracial marriage, illegal. Halfway into the memoir, however, the conflict shifts away from the external forces that drove her parents to divorce, to the frequent neglect Rebecca felt in the shadow of her mother’s career, punctuated with scenes like the one in which her boyfriend opens an empty refrigerator in the Walkers’ apartment: “Damn, you don’t have no food.’ I don’t say anything, but I feel embarrassed, like I am naked, or maybe poor.” In a vignette-like structure, she gives us Polaroid-sized shots of the many apartments and houses she occupied during her parents’ shared custody arrangement (which shifted every *two years* from East Coast to West); of a constant revolving door of babysitters, best friends, school bullies and boyfriends; of the early experimentations with drugs and sex (she had an abortion at fourteen) that would make the head of a “helicopter parent” explode.

While Rebecca writes frankly of her childhood loneliness and loss of innocence, the tone of the book is not so much critical as it is ambivalent. “My parents did not hold me tight,” she writes in the opening pages, “but encouraged me to go. They did not buffer, protect, watch out for, or look after me. I was watered, fed, admired, stroked, and expected to grow.” She is careful to cast her precocity and autonomy as “a mixed blessing,” as she would tell her mother’s biographer: “It probably would have been better had I not spent so much time alone. But my mother gave me space, almost as if I were a peer or sister.”

Rebecca is right on that point. In a passage of “*One Child of One’s Own*,” Walker writes of her daughter, “We are together, my child and I. Mother and child, yes, but *sisters* really, against whatever denies us all that we are.” It’s a curious positioning. On the one hand, the alignment not only equalizes mother and child, but also unites them through a shared struggle; they are *sisters against* the force of oppression, be it sexism or racism or whatever denies the rights and agency of black women. Rebecca, on the other hand, takes a slightly different view of the struggle involved in being her mother’s “sister”: “In interviews my mother talks about how she and I are more like sisters than mother and daughter. I am game, letting her sit in my lap for a photo for the *New York Times*, playing the grown-up to my mother’s child for the camera. I feel strong when she says those things, like I am much older and wiser than I really am. It’s just that the strength doesn’t allow for weakness. Being my mother’s sister doesn’t allow me to be her daughter.”

Sheila Munro, too, felt less like her mother’s daughter than she did her “girlfriend,” a dynamic she attributes partly to the zeitgeist of the sixties (“It was 1966, and we both favored the lacy stockings and shorter skirts that came into fashion that year”), and partly to her mother’s “hands-off approach,” a conscious decision on Alice Munro’s part to reject the kind of mothering she received, growing up the child of strict Scottish Presbyterians who “disapproved of everything.” But this spirit of independence and permissiveness meant that Sheila often found herself, much like Rebecca, in adult situations before she was ready.

Such was the case when, at a party thrown by her mother, she was allowed to accept an invitation to spend the weekend with the son of a family friend—a man in his early twenties. The weekend getaway came to a halt, however, when Sheila awoke early the next morning and hitchhiked home. “As a teenage girl,” she reflects, “I was not prepared for this intoxicating freedom, this lack of limits . . . I wanted to be like Del [from *Lives of Girls and Women*] but I did not have the saving grace of being a writer.” She wonders why not, what with the Women’s Liberation movement, the burgeoning sexual revolution, and the mere fact of having a mother who wrote unabashedly about a teenage girl’s simultaneous awakening as a sexual being and a writer. How could the daughter of Alice Munro be anything *but* so?

SHEILA MUNRO'S IMPULSE to repeatedly compare herself with Del Jordan, the teenage protagonist of her mother's most celebrated novel, highlights a particularly significant aspect of the parent-and-child writer dynamic: the tendency for the child to identify with, if not size herself up against, the children created by the parent's imagination—especially when those figures are drawn so vividly and recognizably. Despite Alice Munro's disclaimer at the beginning of the book ("This novel is autobiographical in form but not in fact. My Family, neighbors and friends did not serve as models"), and despite Sheila Munro's acknowledgment that it's a categorical mistake to conflate fiction with autobiography, she can't help but read herself and her lived experiences through the lens of her mother's work: "So much of what I think I know . . . is refracted through the prism of her writing. So unassailable is the truth of her fiction that sometimes I feel as though *I'm living inside an Alice Munro story*" [emphasis mine].

Better, Christopher Dickey might argue, than living on the *outside* of it, desperate to connect the child's truth to that of the parent's written word. In *Summer of Deliverance: A Memoir of Father and Son*, Christopher writes of the complicated relationship he maintained with his father, James Dickey, the famous Southern poet and author of the novel *Deliverance*, whose penchant for myth and metaphor may have served his writing well enough, though it disconnected him from his family. "[James Dickey] believed the poet 'is not trying to tell the truth, but to make it,'" Christopher notes. "But the lying wasn't limited to the poem. And, in truth, he lied the most about the people who loved him most, until we came to feel he didn't so much know us as imagine us." Like Sheila Munro, it seems Christopher Dickey can't help but search his father's work for representations of those figures and events that affirm what the son knows to be true. Desperate to get at this *truth*, he began sifting through his father's collection of work and personal artifacts, realizing, "There was no way to get at him without filtering his experiences through my own: my memories of his parents, my adolescence, my wars, my middle age. And when I would read the letters and the notebooks and the poems written by James Dickey at the height of his powers, I found a man who was just my age—no older, no younger—an

accessible genius and a shadow father-brother whom I could know, I thought, I hoped, like no one else.”

Indeed, like a *shadow*, the self that Dickey constructs on the page appears larger and darker to his son, distorted by false memories (the made-up first wife who died fantastically of blood poisoning), exaggerated brushes with tragedy (the paralysis he nearly suffered, injuring his back), and fabricated illnesses (the undiagnosed diabetes that Dickey claimed was killing him), an inextricable blend of reality and fantasy. “Long before *Deliverance*,” Christopher concludes, “my father had begun to make himself up. And me. He would not tolerate for a minute the world as it was.”

But more than the fabrications and hyperbole, it was his father’s capacity for cruelty that stunned Christopher, growing up. At times he “killed off” family members in his work. At other times, drunk behind the podium, he read work that publicly embarrassed his wife and two boys sitting in the audience. Such was the case when James Dickey read the poem “Adultery,” dedicated to Dickey’s mistress at the time. Christopher recreates the scene, alternating lines of the poem with the son’s parenthetical soliloquy:

*We have done it again we are
Still living. Sit up and smile,
God bless you. Guilt is magical.*

(End. A thin smattering of uneasy applause. And fuck you, Dad.)

James Dickey was both a sensation and a spectacle in the literary scene, made worse, in Christopher’s opinion, by the meteoric success of *Deliverance* and the toxic effect fame had on his father. By the time the novel was adapted to film, Christopher feared he had lost his father forever to alcoholism. “It had been bad when he was barnstorming for poetry, and worse when he was a best-selling novelist, and now, if the film was a success, all restraints, all that was left of him that I loved, would be gone.”

Some of this proved true. Dickey’s ego swelled during the filming of *Deliverance*, but Christopher found he wasn’t as bothered by his father’s antics as he was by the artistic concessions he made toward the novel’s adaptation.

“James Dickey had not made this movie,” he contends, “he had let it make him. This man, this father-poet-god, who had always demanded of himself, and of me, such perfection, had settled for artistic compromises that he would never in his imagination have tolerated—or forgiven—in another poet, in a student, in his child.”

But Christopher, too, cracked a little under pressure on the film’s set. As Dickey’s son, it was assumed he was a proficient archer, like his dad, one who would be able to provide the film crew with a close-up shot of a fish struck by an arrow. But, again and again, Christopher struggled to hit the fish. “I was Jim Dickey’s son, and I wasn’t able to do what he could do,” he writes, “or, more precisely, *what the characters he created could do*” [emphasis mine]. While it sounds absurd to size oneself up against *imaginary* people, it’s pertinent to remember that such characters are honed athletes and archers—mythologized men, like Dickey himself—who sprang from *father-poet-god’s* mind, as though he were a living Zeus.

Incidentally, James Dickey liked to say he had “made” his oldest son’s head—that he had “produced a son who can *think*,” according to Christopher. But it was hard for the son to know where his father’s thinking ended and where his own began: “[My father] defined me as his mirror.” Bound up in each other’s consciousness, they couldn’t help seeing themselves in the things each other did and created—or *failed* to do and create—to the point that it was necessary for their careers, and nearly their lives, to diverge.

NOT SURPRISINGLY, one of the most prominent tensions in this case study involves the son’s or daughter’s struggle to forge an identity separate from the parent’s. To do so requires a great deal of self-possession and an even thicker skin. The pressure to emulate, if not exceed, the parent’s success can be demoralizing, even debilitating.

When *Life* magazine solicited Christopher Dickey to write the story behind the filming of *Deliverance*, they found his take on it “too negative.” By this point,

Christopher was used to the drill: “My father was able to pass on to me, now and again, writing assignments he didn’t want. But people came to my father for his genius, and to help them create myths. I was not a genius, and demythologizing was becoming my obsession.” He simply couldn’t—or perhaps wouldn’t—give

them what they wanted: a neat replica of his father in print. Because a replica, no matter how close to the original, is doomed for an unfair and unfavorable comparison—especially if the comparison is self-internalized, as Sheila Munro can attest.

In a writing group once, a man turned to Sheila and asked, “So, what do you write?” The question was an innocent one, but it registered sorely to her, so sure was she that this man was mocking *Alice Munro’s daughter*.

At this point in her life, she had graduated college and taken up tutoring while she figured out the answer to the aforementioned question. It was also during this time that she and her mother grew closer, though the emotional intimacy brought with it a constant reminder of the stark contrast between their writing careers. Sheila began to feel, ironically, like the “proud parent” cheering from the sidelines, always there to celebrate her mother’s latest accomplishment, which had to be coaxed from her; Alice Munro never broadcasted her good news. Sheila had to hear about it through friends and acquaintances, so that she grew quite good at feigning delight, while inside she wondered how she could possibly live up to her mother’s example: “She is the gold standard by which everything else is measured, to whom everyone else is compared. And I can understand why. I do not disagree. It’s just that it makes her into an icon and I don’t suppose anyone wants their mother, or their father for that matter, to become an icon. What is there to do with an icon besides worshipping it, or ignoring it, or smashing it to pieces?”

But Alice Munro is hardly an icon—an *object of uncritical devotion*—in her daughter’s work. Along with charting Munro’s life and career, Sheila doesn’t avoid examining the hurt feelings and unflattering aspects of being the daughter

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of such a prolific writer and unconventional mother. (Munro to her daughter: “Let’s say I was thinking of the kind of mother I would be, not what it would do to you.”) In the process, Sheila’s portrait of her mother feels balanced, fair, and most of all, *true*—and Alice Munro must have known that it would; there was no one she trusted more to write her biography, as she told her daughter. Still, Sheila “didn’t have any strong reaction” to her mother’s idea, at first. In time, however, she realized it wasn’t a straight biography she wanted to write at all, but a memoir of “Growing Up with Alice Munro,” as the book’s subtitle posits.

Actually, Sheila had been working on autobiographical vignettes about life with her mother for years, but never knew what to do with them. It wasn’t until six months after her mother’s pitch that Sheila “knew without a doubt that this is what [she] had to do”; that is, she had found her answer to that irritating question *what do you write?* In this way, Sheila did not so much escape her mother’s shadow as illuminate it from a position impossible for any other biographer to achieve—that of Alice Munro’s daughter. It seems the same status that dogged her all those years would become the very ticket she needed to come into her own, as a writer.

For Christopher Dickey, however, the impetus to write a hybrid biography/“Memoir of Father and Son” would come much later, after years of pursuing a different path to writing in the media’s spotlight that took him as far away from his “father’s orbit” as possible—to war zones in the Middle East and Central America. In journalism, Christopher’s long-held belief in the verifiable truth found germane application, as a foreign correspondent for both the *Washington Post* and *Newsweek*. He wrote and published two books about his assignments abroad (*With the Contras: A Reporter in the Wilds of Nicaragua* in 1986, and *Expats: Travels in Arabia from Tripoli to Tehran* in 1990), all the while “trying desperately to feel like [his] own man but trying, still, to be [his] father’s son.” Though both had carved out a life of writing, Christopher’s loyalty to factual accuracy contrasted greatly with the mythopoetic truth his father valued most, on the page and beyond. James Dickey believed “a writer should use everything he knew, and dreamed—everything he felt,” well beyond the mere facts of the story. Indeed, reporting “bored” him. It was a language he didn’t understand, didn’t speak. Their phone conversations grew fewer and far between. “And that

was fine with me,” Christopher notes. “God bless his boredom, I thought. It meant we had nothing to talk about, and less and less reason to talk at all.”

The two would come close to estrangement, triggered first by the death of James Dickey’s first wife, Maxine Syerson, from complications related to alcoholism, which Christopher blamed his father for; and second, by his father’s subsequent marriage to a much younger former student, Deborah Dodson, not even six weeks after Maxine’s death. Still, Christopher could not bring himself to walk away from the relationship. “Like my mother,” he reflects, “I guess, as much as I wanted to get away, I still had no idea where to go. The anger was only a beginning.” As James Dickey’s health declined, and his second wife’s mental illness escalated (and, with it, her physical abuse of Dickey, to the point of hospitalization), it was Christopher who intervened, helping his father to finally leave Deborah, and enrolling their daughter Bronwen in a boarding school a safe distance away from the household dysfunction.

And it was Christopher who made sure the university recorded his dad’s “last lecture,” which he delivered from home when he was too sick (from liver failure) to come to campus. *Summer of Deliverance* culminates in a transcription of this final poignant lecture, but even so, James Dickey doesn’t get the last word in his son’s memoir. Rather than end with his father’s impassioned mythopoetics, Christopher describes an uncanny experience—one that echoes a significant scene from *Deliverance*—outside his father’s home in the months following his death: “It was a strange coincidence to hear the owl at Litchfield that I had never heard before, but it was not a dream, and the moment was beyond my power to invent. It was only the truth as it is. As it must be.”

As it must be, a declaration akin to saying *Amen—so be it*. With these last lines, Christopher Dickey makes peace with the difficult history between his father and him—between a writer who turned everything into myth, and another who was always searching for the truth, the man, behind it. And perhaps that search went both ways. As he cleaned out Dickey’s house, Christopher found beside his father’s bed an issue of *National Geographic* focused on Palestine. “He had been trying to know what I did,” Christopher realizes. “He had been trying.”

But what happens when *trying* isn’t enough? Following the publication of her daughter’s first memoir, Alice Walker took issue with the way Rebecca

characterized her as a self-centered and absent mother. “I was right there ninety-five percent of the time,” Walker insisted to her biographer. “At first I was hurt by Rebecca’s book, but now, I’m completely over it. I told her, ‘I will always be your mother and always love you.’” That was around 2004, three years before the publication of Rebecca’s second memoir, *Baby Love: Choosing Motherhood After a Lifetime of Ambivalence*. It was during Rebecca’s pregnancy and the writing of *Baby Love*—a book structured as a pregnancy diary but heavily preoccupied with her dysfunctional relationship with her mother—that the two suffered a falling-out that persists to this day.

In the entry dated June 29, 2004, Rebecca pinpoints their rift, which began over an interview that appeared on Salon.com and featured a loaded passage from *Black, White, and Jewish*, quoted earlier (“[My parents] did not buffer, protect, watch out for, or look after me”). Seeing the passage paraded so publicly, for the second time, reopened old wounds; Walker threatened to write a recriminatory letter to the editor in which she accused her daughter of lying, prompting Rebecca, “for the twenty-five-thousandth time,” to apologize “for telling my truth in a way that hurt her . . . [I] told her that I tried to protect her the best way I knew how. Then I asked whether she thought it was a little strange that I wrote about my struggle in an attempt to *get her to take care of me*, but here we were talking about how I should be taking care of her. Again” [emphasis mine].

As Rebecca points out, she and her mother held very different ideas about the function of the work in question; Rebecca writes that she saw her memoir as some kind of appeal to Walker’s maternal instincts, in her deep need to be *taken care of* still—while Walker purportedly compared Rebecca’s treatment of her in the memoir to being “sold down the river,” in a direct reference to “the full memory of slavery,” which Rebecca, as a non-Southerner (“read: I am half white”), could never fully understand.

More than parsing out their personal attacks, what I want to stress here is the particular way the theater of writing creates a minefield of the parent-child relationship, not only triggering past hurts, but implanting even more volatile ones. And the Walkers have yet to recover from it. As Rebecca reports toward the end of *Baby Love*, when she asked her mother to apologize for threatening to “ruin the reputation it [had] taken [Rebecca] fifteen years to build,” Alice

Walker responded that she had “apologized enough and that children should forgive their parents and move on.” In a final blow that sent Rebecca to bed for days—as she later told JuJu Chang of *Good Morning, America*—Alice Walker told her daughter she’d “been [her] mother for thirty years and [was] no longer interested in the job,” signing the email pointedly with her first name.

So much for the reassurance *I’m completely over it and I will always be your mother*. It’s hard not to cringe at Walker’s blatant abdication of parental responsibility—just as she is about to become a grandparent, no less. That said, there’s something equally discomfiting about Rebecca’s play-by-play delivery of the fight, rendered in diary form with unmediated transparency, before the writer has even had a chance to process its full weight and meaning for herself, let alone for the reader. The tone of these passages teeters dangerously toward adolescent angst. And Rebecca anticipates this critique when she writes (about her desire to interview Arthur Miller’s daughter over the famed playwright himself), “I remain interested in the children who manage to emerge from the shadow of well-known parentage. So few make it. Then there’s the sobering truth that no matter what you go through, it’s like being the poor rich kid: *People just think you’re whining*. No one wants to hear the adults who grew up in a rarefied world have serious issues. They just don’t. You’re supposed to shut up and take your last name to the bank” [emphasis mine].

More recently, however, the Walkers’ anger seems to have cooled, and in its place, a growing forlornness toward the lost relationship. In a 2008 *Daily Mail Online* article, Rebecca writes that she remains open to reconciling, adding that her son, Tenzin, deserves a grandmother. And on Walker’s end, she published a poem on her blog not long ago called “Making Frittatas,” which she dedicated to Rebecca and posted alongside an old photograph of the two of them. “Ten years is a long time / and I have missed you,” the opening lines read. In the poem, mother and daughter share in the tricky art of “making frittatas,” clearly a metaphor for “the mutual teaching and learning / that is, or should be, a daughter’s and a mother’s right.” *A daughter and a mother*. Not two “sisters,” as Walker had once defined the relationship in her work. Here we see a mother ready to step back into her role as such, both humbled by and proud of not only their ability but their *right* to still learn from each other.

The poem is as close to an olive branch as anything Walker has written. But whether or not Rebecca has received it remains to be seen—though in the same year that Walker posted “Making Frittatas,” Rebecca acknowledged to an interviewer that she and her mother are “working on [their relationship],” noting, “I think it’s definitely positive that I haven’t written another memoir about growing up.” All of this is to say, if there’s any hope for reconciliation, it seems their respective work will be the litmus test for it, indicating that the relationship has evolved and is worth saving—worth *trying* for.

CONCLUSION: TO HELL AND BACK

WHETHER IT’S PRESSURE to make the choice between being a good parent or a better writer, or the anxiety of living up to a standard of success, or the resentment that comes with feeling mistreated on the page, parent-and-child writers are bound to experience some struggle in their relationships where the job hazards of writing and parenting converge. That’s the bad news.

The good news is—and I can say this from humble and limited experience—there’s the trade-off of having someone who “gets it”: why we’re committed to practicing this incredibly difficult and undervalued art form. And, more than that, of forging a deeper and more intimate connection through writing—of continually getting to know one another, almost anew, through each other’s work. I once heard a psychologist theorize that the happiest long-term monogamous relationships were those in which both partners constantly “rediscovered” each other. That is, just when you think you know everything there is to know about your beloved, you’re given an occasion to see that person in a slightly new light—one that is intriguing, mystifying, and yes, challenging.

I wonder if parent-and-child writers don’t experience something similar when they rediscover each other, and themselves, on the page. I see it in the wonder Sheila Munro displays toward her mother’s stories for the way they reveal, in a startling light, not only her mother’s consciousness but her own (“When I first read the story I marveled at my mother’s ability to capture my character. . . . And I thought, *how could she know I was like that* . . . ?). I see it in

Rebecca Walker's hope, articulated in a 2014 interview with *The Rumpus*, that her mother might read her new novel, *Adé*, and recognize "some of her own beauty reflected in that [novel's] character, in a way that will make her feel the depth of my gratitude." And I see it in the way Christopher Dickey pours over his father's essay "Barnstorming for Poetry," desperate for clues as to what the poet was thinking at the time when things began to unravel at home ("as if its exegesis could tell me what went wrong, and partly it does. The poet is worried about middle age, about losing his talent, about losing his hair and teeth").

As uncomfortable, if not painful, as these rediscoveries are, they reflect a deep engagement in thinking about the other's psychology in an effort to understand the nuances and patterns that have long shaped the relationship, and informed the writing of their own books. "And some of [those books] will be glowing and some of them will be messy," Rebecca tells *The Rumpus*, "and that's how family is." Rebecca didn't wait for "permission" to write her books, or ask her mother to vet them first; her right to do so, she claims, was established long ago by her mother's precedent: "I basically said, 'Look, I'm following the tradition you gave me.'" And she remains steadfast in her advice to other writers to be brave in their work, above all. "I don't know of any work that I love that isn't brave."

To other parent-writers, Rebecca suggests they follow the lead of popular novelist Erica Jong, who didn't disown her daughter, Molly Jong-Fast, for writing unabashedly about the family's skeletons but, rather, "threw her a huge book party, put her book on her website, and really championed her as a writer and as a voice. . . . It would be hard," Rebecca admits, "but I think that's what parents should do."

According to an essay she wrote on slander a few years ago, Alice Walker might have slightly different advice: *malama pono*. The ancient Hawaiian farewell means "take care of the truth"—another way of saying, *be careful with it*. As

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a result of the fall-out with Rebecca, Walker realizes that she “unintentionally distorted the life of [her] father” in her own work, for various reasons she can see now, more self-aware than ever.

And maybe this is the best that parent-and-child writers can hope for—the conviction to make art, yes, but the grace to learn from it, and from each other. Bravery *and* humility, in equal tension. More and more, I am realizing the importance of this balance, both in parenting and in writing about my son, which I have only just begun to do—and he about me. When I appear in his work, I feel a flutter of vanity held in check by a simultaneous twinge of fear and wonder (*so that's how he sees/remembers/thinks about me*)—and I can only imagine that he experiences the same, faced with my work. We joke that everything we do and say is “fair game,” potential fodder for a poem or essay. But beneath the joking is a sense of trust staked on years of collectively exchanging our work, ideas, our frustrations and success alike, and of coming to know each other well for it. And that trust can be summed up very simply: that, as people who love each other profoundly, we will act in good faith, knowing that sometimes it will be enough, and sometimes it won't, for either ourselves or our writing.

It may be a blessing, at least for our son, that neither my husband nor I are well known for our work. And because we're not famous, there is a lot less pressure—at least, externally—for him to live up to our example. It's small comfort, but it's comfort nonetheless after reading of the lingering hurt that can fester when family life is fully steeped in the writing life. Sure, we could say, *to hell with it*. Or, *I'm no longer interested in the job*. Or worse, say nothing at all, for years.

Or we could sigh and, what the hell, open our arms: *Welcome*.