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## New Books

By Jane Smiley

**T**he memoir is a tempting but treacherous form. As the English novelist Rachel Cusk writes in **AFTERMATH: ON MARRIAGE AND SEPARATION** (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$20), “Unclothed, truth can be vulnerable, ungainly, shocking. Over-dressed it becomes a lie.” Cusk is known for her sharp style, and in *Aftermath* she makes no attempt to paper over her wrath at the breakup of her marriage:

We were a man and a woman who in our struggle for equality had simply changed clothes. We were two transvestites, a transvestite couple — well, why not? Except that I did both things, was both man and woman, while my husband — meaning well — only did one.

The union was not happy, but it was convenient, since he did most of the housework. Of her husband’s belief that she “treated him monstrously” Cusk writes: “It was his story, and lately I have come to hate stories” (which doesn’t prevent her from telling her own). When he reminds her that they share equally in the family property and the children: “They’re my children, I said. They belong to me.” From there, partly by means of a toothache, Cusk’s meditation expands, and her view of the married couples she sees around her darkens. Watching families bicycling in a park, she dismisses the entire Judeo-Christian tradition in one go (“The day feeble Joseph agreed to marry pregnant Mary the old passionate template was destroyed. That was an act of fundamental dishonesty all round . . . a lie!”). She prefers the Clytemnestra-Agamemnon model:

There are no devoted mothers here, no perfect children, no protective dutiful fathers, no public morality. There is only emotion, and the attempt to tame it, to shape it into a force for good.

Admirers of Cusk's earlier works (most notably *Saving Agnes*, which won the Whitbread First Novel Award in 1993) will be grateful that this book is fewer than 200 pages long, and that the pages have very large type. Cusk's memoir reads like a tantrum — an erudite and eloquent tantrum, but a tantrum nonetheless.

**D**amaged childhoods fuel the memoir machine, but Katie Hafner's **MOTHER DAUGHTER ME** (Random House, \$26) delivers an unusually graceful story, one that balances honesty and tact. Her account of attempting to care for her aging mother, Helen, to rear her (okay, a little spoiled) teenage daughter, Zoë, and to reconcile herself to a long history of unexpected blows and difficult circumstances begins with all three women moving in to a San Francisco Victorian, where Hafner and Zoë live on the upper floors and Helen gets the basement to herself. Such intergenerational living was once common in America, but today, as Hafner discovers, this arrangement is almost unique statistically, and never mind the backstory: Helen's quickie divorce from Hafner's father when Hafner was five; Helen's rapid descent into alcoholism, which led to child neglect, dangerous living conditions, and unsavory sexual partners (Hafner's childhood pets were named after her mother's lovers). When Hafner's grandfather extracted the ten-year-old Katie and her twelve-year-old sister from their mother's home and sent them to live with their father, another disaster ensued. Sound depressing? Hafner narrates the events so adeptly that they feel enlightening rather than enervating. The organization of her material neatly replicates the stages of ignorance she passes through: at the beginning, the new house is "a tall Victorian from the late 1800s, yellow with white and gold-leaf trim on a rare flat stretch of Pacific Heights"; but by the end she realizes that "what we ended up with was an expensive walk-in freezer." So, too, her case against her mother ("When she drank, she grew mean. She would emerge from her bedroom once or twice a day, looking bloated and terrible, to rail about something. Sometimes she was clothed, but often she was not") is eventually undermined by the discovery that her father had persuaded a judge to revoke alimony, leaving Helen penniless, and that Helen was herself the desperate child of a ruthless, raging mother and a distant father. A central conflict running through *Mother Daughter Me* —

what Hafner calls “a pure distillate, a centrifuged pellet comprising all our struggles” — is over the Steinway grand, which her mother has transported, with some trouble, from San Diego to their new house. Hafner, whose last book was *A Romance on Three Legs: Glenn Gould’s Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Piano*, sees the Steinway as the only legacy she wishes to receive in her mother’s will. Helen sees it as a valuable commodity — and sells it. But having finally made peace with her mother and daughter, Hafner lets the piano go — retaining it only as a symbol of what she has gained rather than lost.

**J**eanne Nolan is not a writer. **FROM THE GROUND UP** (Spiegel & Grau, \$26), her first book, uses memoir neither to explore her own consciousness nor to reaffirm her stylistic daring. Nolan begins with her 2004 return to her well-to-do family’s home in Winnetka, Illinois, as an unwed mother escaping a sinister agricultural commune in North Carolina. After seventeen years with the commune, she is frightened and ashamed; her departure results from her constant battles with the commune’s director over the raising of her child:

They’d controlled us by convincing us that the outside world was toxic — deathly so — and that we, personally, were deeply tainted and in need of purification that only they and the farm could provide.

At home, she soon realizes that the commune gave her an incidental education in farming, and she begins putting her expertise to work around Chicago. It is evident from Nolan’s prose that the people on the commune did much to destroy what was once a confident young woman (toward the end of the memoir she modestly contends that if “I could perform a task and fully understand it, anybody could”). But Nolan’s vision is more profound than she thinks. The joy of *From the Ground Up* is not Nolan’s own happy ending but rather the illuminating way she applies her vision to practical problems. Ten days after planting a large public garden, she returns to find it overgrown with nut grass. She feels overwhelmed by the weeding: “Vegetables and fruits produce seeds at the very end of their life cycles,” she explains, “but weeds often produce a huge number of seeds when they’re young, and so they multiply even if they don’t live very long.” Nolan quickly realizes that nut grass is easy to pull up — and so she enlists visitors. The nut-grass “insurrection,” as she calls it, becomes an opportunity to teach visiting children about weeds, and the shared

project builds enthusiasm in the community for the garden.

The hardest memoir to write is the one that is honest but not self-obsessed; Nolan accomplishes this with clarity and poise.

**D**ullness is the last thing we might expect from the peripatetic Philip Caputo, author of *A Rumor of War*, *The Voyage*, and *Acts of Faith*, set, respectively, in Vietnam, the Atlantic Ocean, and Sudan. But the dull tone is set for Caputo's new book, **THE LONGEST ROAD: OVERLAND IN SEARCH OF AMERICA, FROM KEY WEST TO THE ARCTIC OCEAN** (Henry Holt, \$28), when he nicknames his truck Fred and his antique Airstream trailer Ethel. He also takes along his wife and his English setters, and mild domestic comedy is thereby wedded to the Interstate Highway System. Unfortunately, Caputo's story is also wedded to the organizational principle of which every memoirist should be wary: chronology. *The Longest Road* plays out with the undramatic evenness of a daily journal (from which one suspects it's adapted), allotting equal importance to the most interesting regions (Florida, Alaska) and the least (Kansas). Caputo does have a mission: impressed by the sheer geographic expanse of the United States and daunted by its cultural and political fragmentation, he asks folks he meets along the way, "What holds us together?" The answers are varied but forgettable — for all his efforts, Caputo never finds a way to shape his shapeless mass of a story. He does show a certain level of self-knowledge: "I have a pedantic streak, a habit of lecturing, and I was going on and on . . ." Yes.

**S**ometimes a memoir is not a confession but a reflection. The title of Howard Norman's new memoir, **I HATE TO LEAVE THIS BEAUTIFUL PLACE** (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$26), hints at mortality, but Norman's tale is conversational, elegant, and full of life:

When Henry James used the phrase "the visitable past," he was largely referring to sites that had personal meaning for him: graveyards, archaeological ruins, centuries-old cathedrals. Conversely, this present book contains memories of places that kept refusing not to visit me — unceremonious hauntings, I suppose, which were in equal measure gifts and curses.

Norman begins with his first experience of paid employment, a job he got at the

age of fifteen working in a bookmobile.

One day in mid-June, about a week after Ottawa Hills High School let out, Pinnie Oler said to me, “You’re every single day on this bookmobile for hours. The city’s just told me I’m able to hire an assistant . . . I’ll lie about your legal age by a year. Nobody gives a shit anyway . . . ” The job paid fifty-five cents an hour . . .

Through the window of the bookmobile, Norman sees that his absentee father — a snappily dressed ne’er-do-well who is supposed to be in California — is in fact passing his days drinking coffee at the local apothecary. He ignores Norman until the boy wins \$666 in a radio contest, whereupon he shows up to claim some of the winnings. The formative experience of the summer, though, comes after Norman borrows (and fails to return) a book on waterfowl from the bookmobile, attempts to build his own trap for wild birds, and kills a swan. “Nearly fifty years later,” Norman writes, “I can still hear its strange guttural exhalation; fifty years of hapless guilt and remorse. So often I close my eyes and picture the water closing over.” But he finds himself going back to the lake, and “at the end of that summer I found it compelling and not peculiar to talk to ducks, gulls, even swans at a distance.”

His passion for birds leads him north, to the Canadian Arctic, where he learns about Inuit culture and records folk tales, including one about “a man who is turned into a goose by a malevolent shaman.” The horror of the transformation doesn’t hit him until autumn, when the flock of geese must migrate: “he falls into unmitigated grief, primarily expressed through a high-pitched wailing lament: ‘I hate to leave this beautiful place! I hate to leave this beautiful place!’ ” Soon Norman himself runs afoul of a shaman, who puts a curse on him. All Norman’s stories — even the last, of a tragedy visited on him and his family, another intimation of death — are related with grace. He shows that the pleasures of the memoir often lie not in a life of dramatic incident but in the flights and transfigurations of a contemplative mind.