My Father, Dancing Short Guide

My Father, Dancing by Bliss Broyard

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

This collection of eight short stories deals with the complex emotions women experience in relationships, particularly in relationships with their fathers. Some of the stories are tearjerkers, others light and uplifting, but all of them are poignant portraits of the special bond fathers and daughters share. All of Broyard's stories emphasize the father-daughter bond, but they also explore the wide range of human emotions experienced by women in close relationships with other people of the opposite sex.

Broyard outlines the feelings her young characters have regarding their sexuality and she focuses on the problems these characters experience in communicating and in learning to understand the changes in themselves. The young women in this work are coming-of-age and dealing with the complexities of the process. In each of the stories in this collection, Broyard explores how fathers influence their daughters' lives and how relationships between fathers and daughters affect how these women grow and learn to relate to the men they encounter in their adult lives.

About the Author

Bliss Broyard was born to Anatole Broyard, the noted essayist and New York Times Book Review critic, and to Alexandra, his wife, who edited her husband's memoir, Kafka Was the Rage, and published it after his death. Anatole Broyard was a prolific writer and a charismatic man and was obviously quite an influence on his daughter.

Not only did he inspire her to write, but to write passionately and affectionately about fathers. Bliss Broyard wrote poetry as a young child, and short stories in college.

The title story of her book, My Father, Dancing, is the tale of a young woman reminiscing about earlier days dancing with her father who is now lying on his deathbed.

Broyard began writing this story when her own father was dying of prostate cancer, and she took three years to complete it.

Anatole Broyard passed away in 1990, and since that time Broyard finished her book and succeeded in creating a vivid portrait of father figures as influential and dynamic as her own.

Bliss Broyard is the Henry Hoyns Fellow at the University of Virginia's creative writing program, and her stories have appeared in Best American Short Stories 1998, The Pushcart Prize Anthology, and the magazine Grand Street. She was also an editor for an MTV series that profiled presidential candidates.

Today, Broyard lives in New York and is working on another book, which focuses entirely on her own father. Because Anatole Broyard was an African American who kept his racial identity hidden for most of his life, his daughter's new work discusses the impact of race on her father's life.

Setting

Because Broyard's book consists of eight separate stories, each story has its own setting, but they flash back to the uppermiddle-class neighborhoods these women lived in as children, places that help characterize the fathers as worldly professional men and the daughters as privileged young women who have lived rather sheltered lives. These young women all grew up in New England, and they all attended elite, private schools. The school setting comes into play in several stories, revealing the bond young women often develop with older male teachers in their desire for father figures in their lives.

Broyard emphasizes the everlasting bond between fathers and daughters by exploring their relationships in both past and present contexts. The cabin in "At the Bottom of the Lake" is a place of the past, as are the kitchen and barrooms where the young woman shared intimate moments with her father in "My Father, Dancing." The present environment in which these characters live contrasts with the world they existed in as young adults and helps to explain the difficulty these women have adjusting to the move to other worlds inhabited by new, younger men with less money, less influence, and less panache. The scenes the characters recall from the past stress the tenderness and intimacy they felt at the time, while the scenes from the present stress the harsh realities they come to recognize. In "My Father, Dancing," for instance, the horrors of the present-day hospital room contrast with the pleasures of the dance floors of the past, and in "At the Bottom of the Lake," the reality of times in the cabin today contrasts with the memories of the cabin remembered from the past. Similarly, the abrupt scene of the car accident in "Ugliest Faces" and the disturbing scene in the cabin in "Snowed In" contrast with the warmth and tenderness remembered from past times.

Social Sensitivity

The women in all the stories come from the same privileged position. But not everyone is fortunate enough to have a father dance her gently into adulthood. People have a completely different view of father.

Many have fathers who are abusive or absent, and these people may have difficulty recognizing the father figure Broyard presents. Broyard's book is clearly slanted toward the upper middle class, to professionals who are articulate and literary, influential and charming, and extremely complex. This is her world, and her view of father.

Broyard's themes in all her stories revolve around the complexity of men. We have to wonder if she presents the adult male in unreal proportions. Because she focuses on the father-daughter relationship, readers get the sense that men have a much greater impact than women on their daughters' sense of identity. This leads us to examine our views of sexual identity. Some critics have said that the women in these stories seem passive, at least in comparison to their fathers. Their fathers overshadow them. The fathers also appear much more complex and charismatic than their wives, and much more in control.

Lenhard's comment about the "overindulged Electra complex"(the female counterpart to the Oedipus complex) begs the question of who might find this work offensive. The young women do indeed appear "obsessed with their fathers," as Linfield says, but does this mean that Broyard presents the sexual dimension of the fatherdaughter relationship in an inappropriate manner? "In Loose Talk," "Snowed In," and "Ugliest Faces," the young women are coming to terms with their sexuality and wishing to establish an intimacy with their lovers and boyfriends like the intimacy they imagined with their fathers. But until they remove their fathers from their pedestals, the urgency of desire can never be as caring, as intimate, or as innocent.

It appears that Broyard sees nothing inappropriate about the sexual element of the father-daughter bond because she presents any sexual awakenings as natural steps in the growing up process. It is only natural that these fathers influence their daughters' sexual development just as they influence their daughter's feelings about love and loss. Broyard stresses the tenderness of the connection. In "My Father, Dancing," Broyard expresses true compassion for a child's pain as she witnesses the physical deterioration of her father. Broyard presents this scenario with tenderness, and what emerges is a recognition of the affection this father and daughter share.

Literary Qualities

The title story, "My Father, Dancing," seems to encapsulate the symbolism Broyard herself recognizes in the nature of relationships. The fathers in her collection are indeed dancing; they are the ones who move and who seem most alive, particularly in their daughters' minds. Dancing can be seen as a metaphor for movement, and also as a metaphor for human emotion. The act of dancing involves an intimate exchange, a give and take that marks the continuing bond between fathers and daughters. Looking back on her experiences dancing with her father—in the kitchen, then in the bars— the young woman realizes that during those moments her father not only taught her to dance but he taught her about life. The father in this story moved his daughter, slowly and intimately, into adulthood. When he danced with her, he talked with her. And when they talked, they revealed things about themselves.

"Father was my first male audience, and I used him as a mirror to understand what I looked like to the world," the young woman in the title story relates. "Once my father told me that he wanted to be the first man to break my heart," she continues, "because then he could ensure that at least it would be done gently." Poignant, powerful words from a woman (both author and character), who considered her father's love gentle, nurturing, and everlasting and her relationship with him one long, continual dance.

But death is not gentle, nor is any of the other ways in which fathers break their daughter's hearts. In the course of life, women all lose their fathers, and they lose them in many ways. As these women grow and change, they lose the men they knew and recognized through a child's eyes.

Broyard's characters are faced with the challenge of finding men to live up to the men they idealized as children, and unless they let go of the hold their fathers have on them, no man will ever be able to compete.

The symbolism of the father's death in "My Father, Dancing" is significant. The women in all of the stories must come to terms with the "death" of their fathers; that is, the death of the father they knew as perfect, their own private protector. They must do this in order to accept their fathers as fallible human beings, as men not gods, and as men with human frailties that these women never could recognize as a young girls.

The concept of death in the literary tradition quite appropriately includes the concept of rebirth. Broyard's death symbolism implies rebirth as well: the rebirth of a woman from her childhood state, and the rebirth of an adult ready to cope with adult relationships. "My Father, Dancing" goes backward in time, from the father's deathbed to places in the young woman's childhood where she danced with her father when he was young and vibrant. Accepting her father's mortality is one way of accepting his fallibility. His death is the ultimate betrayal.

The women in each of Broyard's stories are betrayed by their fathers in some way.

They are not intentionally betrayed, but they feel betrayed as they recognize, sometimes abruptly, that their fathers have never been what they imagined them to be. Now wise to their fathers' weaknesses, these young women feel both betrayed and abandoned. They experience the death of an ideal, the death of naivete, and the death of the father they immortalized in their minds.

The reconciliation of father-as-father with father-as-man naturally leads Broyard to present a set of contrasts. In "My Father, Dancing," for instance, she contrasts her images of her helpless dying father with her memories of a strong younger man dancing his daughter into adulthood. In "The Trouble with Mr. Leopold," she contrasts the intelligent, literate father with the father capable of getting a "C" on an English paper, and the helpful, guiding father with the self-serving father concerned primarily with preserving his own vanity. In "The Trouble with Mr. Leopold, " the conflict between these two men allows Celia to recognize the perversity in Mr. Leopold rather than in her own father. But by pitting these two against each other, Broyard subtly reduces Celia's father to Mr. Leopold's level. Broyard is constantly contrasting the young boyfriends with the fathers as well, and by doing so she contrasts realism with idealism, the search for perfection with realization that perfection does not exist.

Though Broyard's collection is highly symbolic, it is also realistic in that it portrays the complex emotions of everyday life. Broyard appears to have a keen understanding of human behavior and a talent for revealing unspoken depth and meaning in ordinary conversations, intercourses, and gestures. Some of the stories read like an autobiography, written in first-person narrative. The others, written in third person, still appear autobiographical, with Broyard detailing small moments to convey enormous concepts. Broyard uses descriptive language to create vivid pictures of the meaningful moments in these women's lives, so we see their relationships in a series of images, arguably the most powerful of which is Kate dancing with her father. We get glimpses of the father-daughter interchange in the past and in the present, which helps us understand the strength of the father-daughter bond and the inevitability of breaking it.

The young women in these stories are naive in many ways, and they all seek acceptance from their fathers. Both the fathers and the daughters are similar in so many ways that they could almost be the same person. In this way Broyard gives her stories a sense of continuity. The fathers are all affluent, intelligent, and vibrant, while the women all appear shy and insecure.

The fact that Broyard included women in all stages of life, from young girls to married women, seems to reveal the continuing influence of the father-daughter relationship. The relationship is ongoing like a dance, and the movement inherent in that dance naturally leads women through the stages of their lives.

Broyard seems to be a master at creating poignant images that convey powerful emotions. The image of the daughter dancing with her father evokes a far different emotion than does the image of Mr. Leopold lining the girls up outside his office so he can give them lessons in fashion and style, or the image of the boy in "Snowed In" removing a drunken Lily's clothes and fondling her body. Broyard allows her characters

to recognize the flaws in the other men in their lives on purpose. In doing so, she lets us know that these women are learning to recognize that men are capable of deception. Recognizing that their own fathers are also capable of deception is simply the next step.

Anatole Broyard was literary and articulate, like the father in "The Trouble with Mr. Leopold," and given that Bliss Broyard began writing "My Father, Dancing" when Anatole was dying, what could be more autobiographical than the image of a father lying in his hospital bed? As autobiographical as the book may be, Broyard succeeds in revealing universal needs and emotions.

All fathers dance in the minds of their daughters, and those daughters fortunate enough to have a close relationship with their fathers allow these men to dance them gently into adulthood.

Themes and Characters

The protagonists in all the stories are young women coming-of-age and exploring their relationships with men, particularly with their fathers. All these women fit into the same mold as Broyard: they all come from upper-middle-class backgrounds and they all have fathers who are charismatic, worldly, and wise. Essentially, the father in each of Broyard's stories could be the same man. The father in "The Trouble with Mr. Leopold" is a writer, the father in "A Day in the Country" and "Snowed In" is an orchestra conductor, and the father in "At The Bottom of the Lake" is a lawyer.

All of these men are smart, literary, and articulate, like Broyard's own father, and as their stories unfold, they all reveal a side of themselves that their daughters never before recognized. It is difficult to see our fathers in contexts other than as fathers, but Broyard explores the father figure as a man of many faces. She explores the complexities and human weaknesses these men possess as their daughters discover these frailties for the first time. Because the women in Broyard's stories have idealized their fathers but come to see them in a new light, they must deal with debunking their ideal.

As these women grow into adults, they begin to see their fathers as complex characters; no longer solely protectors and providers, but real men with desires and needs disturbingly similar to those of other men these young women have come to know.

Developing an altered view of the father figure is a necessary step in the maturation process. As young women pull away from their parents and move toward independence, not only must they come to terms with their own individuality, but with the individuality of their fathers as well. Growing up, in this sense, means that women must relinquish the father-daughter connection to some extent in order to relate to other men. The daughters actually get help doing this from their fathers, who inadvertently assist by revealing a side of themselves that feels foreign to their daughters.

These women must learn to relate to men in new ways and to accept the concept of foreignness with regard to understanding the male psyche. The relationships these women form with other men feel odd and rather uncomfortable in comparison with the familiar relationship they share with their father. It is ironic that it is the fathers themselves who validate the concept of the foreign male to their daughters.

Inherent in the process of debunking the notion of father as infallible male is affirming the notion of father as betrayer. All of the fathers, in a sense, betray their daughters. The father's death in "My Father, Dancing" is the ultimate betrayal. It says, "I will no longer be there for you. I can no longer protect you. I am fallible, weak, and mortal." The fathers in the other stories all betray their daughters in lesser ways. In "Mr. Sweetly Indecent" the father betrays his daughter by exposing his selfishness and his willingness to deceive. This man, the young woman realizes, is no different from any other man. He is a sexual being, separate from her and her mother, and he is capable of hurting the women he loves. The father in "At the Bottom of the Lake" betrays his daughter when the young woman realizes that it is he, not her stepmother, who has

remained aloof over the years. The father in "The Trouble with Mr. Leopold" betrays his daughter when he exposes his vanity and his vengefulness, and the fact that he is not perfect and can damage his daughter even when trying to help her.

The fathers in Broyard's collection loom larger than life, even in those stories where the fathers never figure as characters in the story. In "Snowed In", for instance, Lily's father never appears, yet his influence is strong enough for readers to feel his presence. The fathers in the stories are clearly the most appealing of the male characters.

They are strong and passionate despite their flaws. But by exposing their flaws, Broyard conveys the message that women must stop idolizing their fathers and learn to recognize their imperfections. Unless these women can do this, she seems to be saying, the other men who come into their lives will never live up to the ideal man they imagine.

In Broyard's stories, the fathers have greater depth of character than the other men who come into the protagonists' lives.

The same holds true for the women. The women in Broyard's collection are strong and resilient, yet still they appear more passive than their fathers, and all of the young heroines crave their fathers' attention. Only five of the eight stories feature fathers as main characters. Yet two of the other three stories seem to center on the search for father figures. "Ugliest Faces" and "The Trouble with Mr. Leopold" both involve male teachers who fill the father role, and both women protagonists crave their teacher's attention. The boyfriends in the stories—such as Sam, Ethan and Ted—appear rather flat, and none of them seem as vibrant or as interesting as the fathers. In "At the Bottom of the Lake," for instance, Broyard neglects to give us much information about Sam's character at all.

"If Sam, Ethan, and Ted seem at times like stick figures, it's because the father dancing here blows them off the page," says Allegra Goodman in her commentary on Broyard's book. Lucy in "At the Bottom of the Lake" struggles to relate to Sam, but keeps him constantly in the shadow of her father. Pilar of "Loose Talk" cannot commit to her lover Max because he does not live up to her image of the perfect man. The heroines in the other stories also struggle with new relationships, and with the realization that their fathers are no longer their primary male companions. All of these women must learn to receive the love and security they got from their fathers from the new men who enter their lives, but they have difficulty doing so. These young women must reconcile their desire for their fathers' approval with their desire to move away from parental influence. They must learn to see their fathers in a different light in order to grow into mature male-female relationships.

The fathers in all of Broyard's stories are far from "ideal." They exhibit human flaws and appear to be manipulative and vain, but intelligent and charming at the same time. In light of these contradictions, the women in the stories seem to feel ambivalent about men, and they struggle to reconcile their idealistic views of male-female intimacy with the reality they come to experience in love relationships of their own. In advancing her

coming-of-age theme, Broyard emphasizes awakenings. Her stories are about awakening to the fact that fathers are fallible. The stories are also about awakening to the fact that women must learn to let go of the most important man in their lives in order to relate to men in new ways.

And Broyard's stories deal with sexual awakenings—sexual awakenings that seem oddly, yet at the same time predictably, connected to how these women feel about their fathers.

Elizabeth Lenhard, in her review of Broyard's collection, refers to the women in the stories as exhibiting "an overindulged Electra complex," and Susie Linfield in her review comments that these young women are "obsessed with their fathers, and filled with longing, muted anger, bewilderment and love." All children must awaken to the fact that their parents exist as people in their own right, and part of this awakening involves recognizing their parents' sexuality. They have roles other than parents, just as the women themselves have roles other than daughters. It is no accident that the young woman in "Mr. Sweetly Indecent" is just returning from an affair of her own when she sees her father kissing another woman. The daughter must confront the shocking possibility that not only is her father cheating on her mother, but he has a sexual side she never before recognized, a side that allows him to love other women in ways he can never love her.

Does the young woman in "Mr. Sweetly Indecent" recognize that however harsh this encounter with her father seemed, it served to validate the affair she herself was having? Perhaps Broyard is saying that women subconsciously feel as if they are betraying their fathers when they get involved with other men. If that be the case, the father in "Mr. Sweetly Indecent" allowed his daughter to accept her own intimate connection with another man by revealing his own intimate connection with another woman. It does no good to undermine the sexual overtones that exist in relationships between fathers and daughters, and Broyard makes no attempt to do so.

Rather, she lets us know that it is natural for this first male-female relationship to affect how women develop into sexual beings.

Anatole Broyard was reputedly quite a womanizer, and so is the man in "Mr. Sweetly Indecent." But all the fathers in this collection are weak and flawed, and they all have the ability to harm as well as to love, to feel sexual passion and to indulge in selfserving behavior as well as to be affectionate and caring. The young women in Broyard's stories must learn to recognize their fathers as fallible, sexual beings. If, indeed, they were the first and, therefore, the most influential men in their daughters' lives, it is inevitable that it is the fathers who must teach their daughters lessons about the complexities of male-female relationships. It is also inevitable that it is the fathers who must teach their daughters about loss. For if, indeed, these women must let go of their fathers, they must also experience a feeling of loss. In each of the stories the pain of relinquishing a father is evident.

Topics for Discussion

1. Do you think of the women in Broyard's collection as passive or submissive?

How does this make you feel?

2. Do you believe the young women in the collection have unrealistic views of male/female intimacy? Why or why not?

3. Do you recognize each of the young women characters in the collection as individuals? Do you think Broyard does a good job in distinguishing the difference between them? Explain.

4. Does Broyard do a good job of distinguishing the differences between the fathers in the collection? What sets one apart from the other?

5. Which of the stories did you consider the most poignant and why?

6. To what extent does miscommunication serve as a theme in the stories?

7. Which of the young women characters do you believe changes the most in their perspective of men? How does she change?

8. What kind of relationship do you think these women had with their mothers?

How did they view their mothers?

9. Who do you consider the protagonists of these stories, the young women or their fathers? Why?

10. Write a paper on the symbolism of death in the title story, "My Father, Dancing."

11. Write a paper on the symbolism of dance, and discuss how it applies to the title story in particular and the collection in general.

12. Discuss the theme of betrayal in three or more of the stories.

13. Using the two stories that involve male teachers, discuss how the heroines of these stories perceive these teachers as father figures.

14. Choose one of the stories that omit the father from the plot. How is the presence of this father felt and what do you know about him?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Do some research on Anatole Broyard.

Compare his personality traits with one of the fathers from this collection.

2. Do research on families without the father present and compare the girls growing up in these families with those who grow up in families with the father present. What are some of the differences you discover? Similarities?

3. The author seems to focus on uppermiddle class families. Compare families in this class with those in the lowerclass. How different, or similar, are the father-daughter relationships?

4. Discuss the contrasting personality traits of the fathers in the collection. All these men are both charming and vain, charismatic and weak. Expand on these contrasts.

5. Discuss Broyard's view of women, based on her characterizations of the daughters and mothers in her stories. Research families without mothers present and compare them to families with mothers. What differences and/or similarities are there in the girls growing up in families without mothers compared to those who had mothers growing up?

6. Elizabeth Lenhard in her book review in the Atlanta Journal and Constitution refers to the concept of an "overindulged Electra complex." To what degree to you believe the young women are obsessed with their fathers? Do they have a healthy love for their fathers, or does their love border on impropriety?

Discuss the Electra complex as a mythological and a psychological concept and detail to what extent you believe it applies to the women in Broyard's collection.

7. Research the Oedipus complex and compare it to the Electra complex.

For Further Reference

Goodman, Allegra. "I Remember Papa."

New York Times Book Review. August 15, 1999: 8. Goodman discusses the similarities between the characters in Broyard's debut collection and the characters in Broyard's own life. She summarizes the plot in each of the stories, and points out the influence Anatole Broyard had on his daughter's life and work.

Lenhard, Elizabeth. "Bloodlines, Not Plot Lines Carry Weight in Dancing." The Atlanta Journal and Constitution (August 8, 1999): 11L. Lenhard presents a more critical view of the book, referring to Broyard's lack of imagination, her "overindulged Electra complex," and, with the exception of "The Trouble With Mr. Leopold," the book's dearth of believable characters and subtle symbolism.

Linfield, Susie. "Stories of Father Obsession and Betrayal: My Father Dancing by Bliss Broyard." Los Angeles Times (August 26, 1999): E5. Linfield discusses the passivity of Broyard's women characters, the similarities of the fathers in the collection to Anatole Broyard, and the "tonal monotony" of the stories. She discusses in particular "My Father, Dancing," "Mr. Sweetly Indecent," and "The Trouble with Mr. Leopold."

Related Titles

Richard Bausch explores similar themes in his collection of short stories entitled Someone to Watch Over Me. These stories, like the ones in My Father, Dancing, stress the impact of intimate relationships and the different ways in which we establish connections. The collection offers insight into the nature of human longing, the human desire for love, and the universal need to establish emotional bonds with other people.

Can You Wave Bye Bye, Baby by Elyse Gasco is another collection of short stories focusing on the bond between mothers and daughters. Like My Father, Dancing, Gasco's book explores the nature of the parent-child bond while at the same time highlighting the complexities of human emotions.

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