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A Long Swim Upstream: Stories by Mike Feder

Mike Feder
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A medley of self-deprecating ruminations—sometimes serious, sometimes tongue-in-cheek—examine the lure of the past and its continuing complications.

Veteran radio personality and current Sirius XM host Mike Feder presents eleven unvarnished portraits of adolescent neuroses, adult uncertainties, and mental illness with appealing gallows humor and wonderment.

The author of *New York Son* and *The Talking Cure*, Feder is a raconteur of personal drama who pays tribute to Queens and its surrounding boroughs—with one honeymoon excursion to Antigua, a quest for guidance in Washington, DC, and a work-related trip to Hollywood—through turbulent, moving autobiographical reflections. Here, a narcissistic mother domineers her family; a son's idealizations of an absent father lead to a lifelong search for authority figures to venerate; and a stay in the psychiatric ward contributes to the unraveling of the narrator's marriage, among other topics.

The stories in *A Long Swim Upstream* avoid depicting the narrator's parents in an easy light. Memories emerge as intersections of loyalty and resentment, love and dread, most effectively in "The Psychic," which culminates in the aftermath of a suicide, as well as in "The Fishing Trip," in which a son wavers between admiration and lingering loss over his father's abandonment. The narrator seldom spares himself, exposing vulnerabilities from his tendency to complain to his habit of refraining from asking others for what he needs. The result is a medley of self-deprecating ruminations—sometimes serious, sometimes tongue-in-cheek—that examine the lure of the past and continuing complications.

Two stories worthy of particular mention turn the narrator's focus toward fellow New Yorkers. In "Here's Herbie," a man with Down syndrome displays enthusiasm on a subway ride, freeing the teenage narrator to follow his own impulses. In "Sanford Brodsky," a Jewish boy whose situation reminds the narrator of his own finds refuge in an Orthodox yeshiva. Both stories contain hopeful elements that balance against darker cruelties at home, mostly stemming from difficult mothers. Feder's portrayals of the women do not tip the balance toward caricature, however, and remain all the more heartbreaking.

Several selections were first penned as monologues and reveal the conversational pacing and immediacy of their performance origins, particularly "Nomads," in which the author's boyhood recollection of the late 1950s melds an active imagination with the discomfort of being reminded of his mother by others in the neighborhood. Replete with catchy openings, magnified observations of the everyday, and calculated anecdotes that build toward resonating conclusions, not all of the pieces transcend their earlier format. Shifts from past to present tense occasionally disrupt the reading. At times, minor digressions, bodily humor, and one-liners add levity while leaving fleeting impressions.

When rhythm and singular images (a toy steering wheel, a ringed moon, a building with a recessed green roof) converge, the writing here achieves seemingly effortless, but thoroughly earned, insights.

KAREN RIGBY (October 15, 2013)

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