



A Tangled Tree: My Father's Path to Immortality

Aiyanna Sezak-Blatt

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This family biography is a pleasure to read throughout: illuminating, deliberate, and lovely.

Aiyanna Sezak-Blatt's *A Tangled Tree* is an aching, beatific trip through a family's cellular memory, showing how intricately our futures are tied to the events of our ancestral pasts.

When the opportunity to write her enigmatic father's life story arose, Aiyanna jumped to the task. The fourth of Michael's six children, Aiyanna recalls being both awed and embarrassed by her father. She relates feeling blessed by the gift of his radical and communal Shabbat practices, but also set apart by his choices, including his frequent transitions between families. She captures colorful memories of him—long-haired, nonconformist, naked, and stoned in the name of transcendence—on the Hawaii beaches of her youth.

But underlying the biography of this wild, rabbinic hippie is a troubled past. Michael was conceived while his parents fled Hitler's grasp, and came into the world just beyond the Reich's reach: "My father was born in ... shape-shifting territory, in a time when maps were drawn and tossed and borders refused to stay still." He grew up haunted by the radical improbability of his very existence; those insecurities bled over into his unconventional lifestyle choices, and ultimately over into his children's sensibilities.

Aiyanna finds herself haunted by what ifs, and by the knowledge of what happened to her extended family, who could not flee:

I have dreamed of my own death in Auschwitz. I have breathed in the gas. I have fallen, naked, to a cold floor, gasping for breath, taking in the green, toxic steam. In my dream, I am not alone.

Such ties are emotively rendered, and make the work a good fit for those interested in the lasting psychological effects of genocides. The book transcends its familiar themes, too, by the sheer power of its prose. Aiyanna captures feelings, moments, and sensations with skill: a lapis stone burning like a memory in the belly of her grandmother; the itchy strangeness of an accidental dose of a hallucinogen; the cramped airlessness of the last train car out of Poland. Such moments are captivating and sensitively captured.

Family dramas are touched upon frequently, though Aiyanna remains a diplomatic storyteller—both naming her father's missteps and allowing him room to forward his own defenses. She troubles through dominant issues thoughtfully, producing nuanced portraits of those who came before her—and, through them, a rounded picture of herself, set appropriately within the family tree.

Flaws are few and are generally cosmetic—an unnerving, unpolished cover; letters to a friend that are preserved in a hard-to-read script. The text remains a pleasure to read throughout: illuminating, deliberate, and lovely.

A Tangled Tree is a stunning family biography—as Michael says of his own memories, “it is so miraculous, so painful, so beautiful it hurts.”

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May 8, 2017)

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