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In My Father's Shadow: A Daughter Remembers Orson Welles

Chris Welles Feder
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If Chris Welles Feder's new memoir were just another biography of the entertainment giant Orson Welles, it would still be cause for celebration among scholars and fans of the man and his work. Welles Feder has presented us more than a biographer (and there have been plenty) ever could: she gives us a glimpse into what Welles was like away from the stage and the camera, both in his presence and heart-rending absence. *In My Father's Shadow* is more than that, however. In addition to offering something that the legion of Welles biographies could not, Welles Feder also offers us, with little sentimentality or self-pity, the story of what it's like to grow up in the culture of celebrity. This is a book with one foot in the genre of literary childhood memoir, but without an obvious hook—the author was not abused nor did she suffer any life-altering illness. This is the story of a child, growing into an adult, who is as well-adjusted as, one presumes, she can be given her parentage.

"Shadow," given the connections Orson Welles has to film noir (*Touch of Evil*, *The Third Man*) seems like an appropriate way to describe him. His public persona involved a lot of half-truths, conjecture, scandal, and misinformation—his legend lay in shadows. A large man as well as a larger-than-life figure, he cast an enormous shadow that affected everyone who befriended, worked with, or loved him.

Welles Feder was Orson's first child, the daughter his first wife, Virginia. Soon after her birth, her parents split up, and Orson and Rita Hayworth were married. Welles Feder's account of her life with Orson begins on a happy note: splashing in a pool with Hayworth, the two of them playfully pestering her father while he was busy scribbling on a notepad. This idyllic lifestyle didn't last for very long—Hayworth and Orson went their separate ways, and Welles Feder spent the majority of her first years with her biological mother and her second husband. From here on, Welles Feder begins to live a life marked by one thing: her father. On the increasingly rare occasions when they spend time together, the reader experiences through Welles Feder a serenity and sense of ease with herself. These occasions never last for long, and the majority of the book recounts the times when the shadow of her father's absence filled Welles Feder with a sense of loneliness, incompleteness, and lacking in sense of self-worth.

The author is a firm Orson Welles apologist. When she tells the story of how she was confronted with the facts of Orson's marital infidelities, she expresses a feeling of outrage that is quickly brushed aside. All can be forgiven in the name of Orson's genius. Welles Feder clearly has a larger than life fixation on her larger than life father—the majority of her youth, as documented in her memoir, is spent thinking about her father and wishing she was with him, being disappointed by his promises to visit her that fell through, or, ultimately, being with him and feeling inadequate. Given the amount of importance she placed on her father's approval, and his incapacity to be the father that she wanted him to be, it's no wonder that the titular shadow permeated every part of her life.

Throughout *In My Father's Shadow*, we have numerous glimpses into what it was like to be around Orson, though the memoir does read as if he's put on a pedestal despite the often painful account of his parental shortcomings. Readers will have more insight, after finishing this book, into Orson's absences, and their effect on his loved ones; Welles Feder's biological mother, Virginia, in particular. The author depicts her as someone deeply hurt by Orson's infidelity, and who tries to use Welles Feder as a pawn to get back at Orson. She utterly disapproves of his lifestyle, forbids her daughter to see him for a time, and in the end, comes off as a classic villainess during a "tell-all" confrontation between her and the author.

As enthralling and revealing as this book is, one wonders if Welles Feder realizes just how deeply in Orson's

shadow she lived, and still lives. There are classic signs of an Electra complex, notably in the warnings from the author's mother and grandparents that she spends far too much time thinking about her father, plus her marriage to a man almost twice her age who seems to be almost as garrulous as Orson. With Orson's death, Feder Welles is finally able to come into her own, but "her own" is her father's legacy. She travels to film festivals where her father is honored, makes speeches, helps biographers, gives input to film archivists, and generally makes sure that Orson's legacy lives on.

Of course, it helps to be familiar with Orson Welles to enjoy this book, and fans of the director and actor should not pass this up, even if, or especially if, they have already read biographies of the man. This book lights up the shadows that were necessarily left by the biographies, and that light comes from an intelligent, articulate, and somewhat tragic author who, throughout her life, was positioned where no biographer could hope to be—in the shadow of, what Feder Welles calls him, "the great man."
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