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Kipling's Cat: A Memoir of My Father

Anne Cabot Wyman
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Of her father, Anne Cabot Wyman writes, “I want to follow his trail, find out who he was and understand how he shaped my life.” This sentence ends the first chapter of *Kipling’s Cat*, launching Wyman on a quest to discover her father, the Boston scientist Jeffries Wyman (1901-1995).

The man is worthy of the search, as he is a singular character. “One night in Rome in 1954,” Wyman writes early in the book, “when Father had been alerted that two FBI men wanted to question him about his friend J. Robert Oppenheimer, he went back to sleep and the next day, after the inquisition, kept a luncheon appointment.” With such details, readers are not only introduced to Jeffries Wyman, they become acquainted with him. A trailblazing eccentric and relentless traveler, Wyman is portrayed in full color: “It was a family joke that Father read Sir Walter Scott like the Bible and the Bible like some racy novel.”

Anne Cabot Wyman applies her journalistic background to this well-investigated biography. Wyman was the *Boston Globe*’s first female editorial page editor. Under her leadership, the *Globe* won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service in 1975.

As might be expected from a trained journalist, Wyman writes in an unembellished voice. Wyman does not experiment with literary language. Rather, the language is transparent, providing a window into a life. Wyman is meticulous in her word choice and commitment to accuracy. She cites her sources: her father’s letters, paintings, drawings, and diary entries.

Kipling’s Cat is best described as a historical account, not a work of creative nonfiction. Wyman’s research does not support a narrative with tension, a plot arc, or conflicted characters. Rather, the book is organized by her father’s varied pursuits: blood, women, Japan, Egypt, and scholarship, among other things. The research is a focal point, making the work heavy in factual truth. Wyman describes the tangible and eschews the thematic. Because it does not provide emotional grounding, the book risks tediousness. Some information is appealing only to an audience interested in the biographee.

But the memoir will find such an audience. After all, Jeffries Wyman is an important scientist, diplomat, and artist. With this work, his daughter has provided a studied portrayal and tender tribute to his life.

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