ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Letters From a Distant Shore
Maria Lawson Fiala
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Marie Lawson Fiala's thirteen-year-old son, Jeremy, suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage smack in the middle of an idyllic, middle-class family life in Berkeley, California. Fiala writes, "Because I was his mother and he had once lived, whole, inside of me, my body still held a connection to his, vibrated in synchrony with his, like a crystal goblet that resonates with a singer's voice. My son's body sang to me in its silence and I could hear every note."

This book is a transcription, of sorts, but the voice is not Jeremy's, for he is in a coma, or else speechless, for much of the book. Even after his speech returns—possibly as a result of a worldwide prayer vigil on his behalf—it is still the ardent mother's voice one hears. A memoir is nothing if not a record of the minutia, the glittering moments when, somehow, all grows still and a larger picture can be made from the assembled particulars. Fiala describes it all—keeping vigil at hospital monitors, changing dressings, surgeries, unanswerable questions, infections, sleeplessness, pharmaceuticals, declines followed by slow improvements. To tell such a story without bringing the lens in close—even harrowingly close—would be disingenuous: this is her world in a grain of sand.

It's difficult to read about other people's tragedies, yet so much is written in this vein. Why? It must be because people want to see how others survive, how they manage to not lose everything or end up nowhere. Fiala survived and she writes energetically about how she did so. The challenge to her, as to any writer, is to mine one's rich personal experience without being self-indulgent or losing sight of the audience whose investment is different. Nailing the fine balance of restraint and candor is not easy to do, and while Fiala doesn't do it always, she manages to do it often.

Jeremy is rendered like a rescued treasure; a beautiful but damaged boy who maintains a great attitude and generous heart, despite it all. So does this mother. Readers want this from memoirs, too: for good people to survive bad things and still be good, even enlightened. Too exultant a redemption, however, makes the reader suspicious. In this case, the members of this family outlast an excruciating medical emergency because they have each other, a large network of friends, their Christian faith, fantastic health insurance, accommodating employers, and the

wits to navigate the inscrutable health care system. Readers who find themselves in similarly challenging circumstances may take courage and solace from this account, even if they may also itch a bit when it registers how rare it is for a family to fare so well under such duress.

Holly Wren Spaulding