

Lying to Children

Alex Shahla

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This is an amusing reminder that there is plenty of hardship in raising children, but there is good fun in it, too.

Alex Shahla's *Lying to Children* is a work of connected, humorous fictional anecdotes, some affectionately sentimental, others laugh-out-loud funny, reporting on the pleasures and perils of raising children.

The book is composed as a letter to the narrator's two children as they approach maturity and get ready to leave for college. It begins by recalling events in the narrator's life: his haphazard career selling insurance, his marriage, his wife motivating him to find better a profession, his pursuit of an MBA. He finally manages to be successful enough to drive a luxury car and live in a prosperous neighborhood. Throughout, there are nuggets of humor concerning the Tooth Fairy, puppies, Halloween, his Scrooge-like approach to Christmas, and other moments of parenting.

The prose engages in some hyperbole, but not to the point of unreasonable absurdity. The narrative rambles at times, as when the narrator admits to being a germophobe before dealing with unmeasured amounts of diapers and upchuck, and learning that "when you have children, you'll never be clean again." A sense of ridiculousness comes into play when a group of men is forced to attend a child's birthday celebration at a pizza-and-game emporium. All are Patriots fans ready to cheer on their team's Hall of Fame quarterback, huddled together listening to the game in the facility's bathroom.

The narrator is complex; he may seem self-involved, but he also revels in self-deprecation and shows himself to be a generous soul devoted to his children. This is particularly apparent in a page-turning scene involving his son's accident. The secondary presence of his wife is also nuanced, even though, through the narrator's eyes, she is saintly: loving, patient, committed to her family. Yet she is also shown to be a person with admirable edginess and a subtle sense of humor. The presentation of the narrator's father, a gruff war veteran, is marvelous and empathetic. Secondary characters include the local suburban denizens, who are a realistic, if exaggerated, bunch. Dialogue does not miss a step and includes many humorous lines. Most anecdotes are affecting, and the suburban setting is neutrally rendered.

Shahla's *Lying to Children* is an amusing reminder that there is plenty of hardship in raising children, but that if one can "learn to turn your misery into motivation," there is good fun in it, too.

GARY PRESLEY (November 17, 2016)

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