

BOOK REVIEW

'Reading Claudius' by Caroline Heller

By **Julia M. Klein** Globe Correspondent, August 1, 2015, 6:00 p.m.

Writing a memoir can provoke questions about history, memory, and accuracy — all the more so when the subject is the lives of others. When evidence is lacking, how should one proceed? How much, if anything, is it permissible to invent? And to what extent should the narrator intrude, calling attention to what's missing or only surmised?

Caroline Heller raises these issues forthrightly in a foreword to "Reading Claudius," a memoir touching on both her parents' lives and her own. Heller, director of the interdisciplinary PhD program in educational studies at Lesley University, was able to draw on interviews, letters, and other documentation, but inevitably there were gaps. "I eventually made the decision," she writes, "to allow myself to imagine some of the historical details — the expressions and clothing, the dialogue and gestures, thoughts, and emotions . . ."

Novelistic liberties, one might say. Quoting Claire Messud, Heller writes that she wanted to recreate "life being lived" in the interstices of the verifiable facts. "Doing so," she explains, "was my way of fulfilling a lifelong yearning to literally make my parents' world whole again, to bring back that dense mingling of the intellectual, the artistic, the social, and the political that defined their early lives — their lost Atlantis of prewar Central Europe."

One can quarrel with the justification, but not with the emotions involved. Nor, it turns out, the result. Heller plunges us lovingly and convincingly into that lost world, conjuring the youthful longings of her mother and her father, as well as her uncle's magnetism, arrogance and sexual confusion.

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Soon after Hitler seized power in 1933, Heller's grandparents, assimilated German Jews, sent their only daughter, 19-year-old Liese Florsheim, to the temporary safety of cosmopolitan Prague. There she studied medicine, learned Czech, and socialized with other Jewish students and intellectuals.

Probably the most charismatic and brilliant of the group was Erich Heller, who would become Liese's somewhat reluctant boyfriend. A precocious essayist whose talent would inspire friendships with Hannah Arendt, W.H. Auden, E.M. Forster, T.S. Eliot and other luminaries, Erich basked in Liese's admiration while remaining emotionally aloof. Meanwhile, his brother, Paul, a shy medical student, nursed an unrequited, unconfessed love for her.

War splintered this tight-knit band. After being captured by the Nazis, Erich managed to escape to England, finish graduate studies, and find a teaching position at Cambridge University. Paul was considerably less fortunate, spending nearly six years in Nazi concentration camps.

His survival, through some combination of luck, grit, and his medical training, seems almost miraculous. So, too, does his fairy-tale reunion with Liese, who had immigrated to the United States, where she had kept "her heart buried in protective layers." The two eventually married, settled in Omaha and then Chicago, and had two children, Caroline and her brother, Tom. Paul's poignant courtship letters, as well as a

fragmentary journal recounting his concentration camp ordeals, are among Caroline's most vivid source material.

The first part of the memoir is narrated in the third person, mostly from the perspectives of Liese and Paul. In part two, Caroline picks up her own story, which echoes those of other children of Holocaust survivors. "We were strangers to our parents' darkness, yet wholly formed from it," she writes. "The real narrative had already been lived, and we were its tiny afterlife."

She and Tom, to whom the memoir is dedicated, spent their childhood "tiptoeing around" certain questions "as if they were broken glass." Infected by her parents' sadness, Heller becomes anxious, solitary, desperately hard-working — even anorectic. She can't bear separation from her parents, transferring from Grinnell College in Iowa to the University of Chicago to stay close.

Meanwhile, Uncle Erich, a great character, still with outsized talents and flaws, joins the faculty of Northwestern University and becomes a frequent, if awkward, visitor to the Heller household in suburban Chicago — bringing with him a deeper sense of a lost past.

The memoir's title refers to the German poet Matthias Claudius (1740-1815), whose verse was bedtime reading in the Florsheim household. Claudius summoned up for Liese "her mother's good-night kiss on the top of her head." In England, Erich, too, reads Claudius, his way of holding on to what he believes is the real Germany. Later, in one of the book's most moving sequences, he reads Claudius to a dying Liese, evoking all that they once shared — and perhaps also that elusive, longed-for "time when all farewells would end."

READING CLAUDIUS: A Memoir in Two Parts

By Caroline Heller

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