

The Sorrows of An American:  
A Review and Brief Interview  
Victoria Hofmo

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Siri Hustvedt's new book's title is The Sorrow of An American. On the surface it refers to psychiatrist Erik Davidsen whose character serves as the "I" in this novel. However, Davidsen's empathetic relationship to his sister Inga, recently widowed, as well as to his reoccurring memories of his mid-western Norwegian family's trials and tribulations leads me to believe that this book could have been entitled The Sorrow of An American Family. Erik's familial ties, as well as his internal conflicts and how he negotiates them is truly a story about all of us, the pain, the pleasure, the hopes filled and unfulfilled. What makes this book truly intriguing is Hustvedt's deep delving into the human psyche through Erik.

By giving Erik the perfect profession to achieve such a task - psychiatrist - we are brought into the inner workings of the mind. The focus is not so much about what we choose, but instead how we get to those choices, in all our messy wanderings, fears and fantasies. We are invited to understand how, Erik has been molded by those who affected his upbringing and how this plays out when he has to deal with his practice and social life, thus making for a very rich and entertaining story.

I was curious as to why this female author chose to take on the male voice, of psychiatrist Erik Davidsen and if she had done this before. Siri answered with the following, "This is the second time I've used a male narrator. Leo Hertzberg tells the story in my previous novel, *What I Loved*, because the male voice carries more authority in our culture, adopting it for novels has given me genuine pleasure. It is a way to speak from the center rather than the margins. As I was writing, I came to think of Erik Davidsen as my imaginary brother because his parents are similar to mine, he comes from the same part of the world as I do, and he works in a field that interests me deeply. I don't find it difficult to write as a man. I think we all have male and female voices within us. You might want to look at my essay, "Being a Man, in my collection: *A Plea for Eros* where I go deeply into the question."

A sense of duality is created by, the female author taking on the male voice. Duality is also emphasized in the repeating theme of the external life coexisting with the internal one. As earlier stated, the use of a psychiatrist as the main character is a natural fit and it's especially wonderful that Erik is

conscious of his own flaws and contradictions. The book's syntax, in places, mirrors our own human ambivalence, the process of weighing the pros and cons. The syntax also mimics our own psychic interconnectedness, our restless thoughts where one thing triggers another. This is especially prevalent in Erik and often brings him back to his past, thoughts of his father and others. It is also evident with Erik's assorted patients.

One, of his patients Mr. T. manifests this interconnectedness with international languages strung together like a James Joycean scat:

*Where's the bar, Mr. Farr?  
Ou est le scar, Desespoir?  
Wo ist mein Shade Star  
Mit la luminiere bizarre  
Ich will etwas sagen,  
Monsieur Fragen,  
Kranheit. Blindsight.  
Strut Stage, Rage Page.*

I asked Hustvedt if she could speak a little to her interest in psychiatry? “I have long been fascinated by the human psyche. All of my work is a testament to that interest. I first read Freud in high school. Psychoanalysis played an important role in the thesis I wrote on Charles Dickens at Columbia University for my PhD, and in recent years, I have read a lot of neurobiology and philosophy of science. The question that fuels my abiding curiosity is simple: Why do we become who we are?”

A wonderful inclusion in this novel is the use of the actual memoirs of Hustvedt's father. Erik reads them incrementally or they come back to him in spurts. Here is where we get insight into the family tree, not so much as genetic lineage but as the lineage of the psyche. Often we see the whys of who the family members are, but we are also reminded that some things may never be revealed, not even to ourselves. We are also reminded about the strangeness of the familiar. The hardship of his Norwegian immigrant family on their mid-western farm, the breaking of the grandfather by the Depression and other tragedies, such as the harsh way the grandmother would speak to and about her husband (Erik's grandfather). We not only see how shame is created, but also how it is transplanted to the next generation

and I am happy to say in this family does it many times sometimes in a healthier more conscience manner than those who preceded them.

I asked Siri, when you spoke to your father about using his memoir did you have this story in mind? “No, I wasn’t exactly sure how I would use my father’s memoir, but I knew that I wanted to bring his past life - especially his childhood in a Norwegian-American immigrant community, the grief his family suffered during the Depression, and his experiences as a soldier in the Second World War.” In her acknowledgements she says that her greatest debt is to her father for permitting her to use his words. She writes in this book, that, ‘In this sense, after his death, my father became my collaborator.’ It is also a very positive and moving way in which to maintain connection and relationship after death

The Brooklyn transplants – Erik and Inga often return to the homestead, not only in their psyches, but also physically. The old farmhouse inherited by Erik, but now lacking inhabitants becomes a symbol of: the past, change, neglect, care, things which you can control, things which you choose to control and things that leave eternal imprints on us.

It is in their childhood homestead that one of the most quirky and interesting parts is found. They are peculiar lifelike dolls made by Lorelei and Lisa. Unlike other traditional dolls they are not only permitted, but also reveling in their flaws. They are almost like internal personal voodoo dolls. Instead of being used to control another, we can see the damage within ourselves and those we know and love.

When I asked Siri why she chose to include these creatures, she responded, “I knew the dolls would be part of the novel from the beginning. They are important because every little figure has a story of being wounded in some way. Lisa and Lorelei are both damaged people. Their dolls are artistic expressions of their inner lives and making them is a form of sublimation. So the dolls to recapitulate the novel’s larger exploration of the “bandaged place,” how people live with their scars, and most importantly, that the act of telling and creating stories can be healing.” In fact, the telling of stories to heal is repeated in other creative endeavors. For instance, Miranda (Erik’s tenant and love interest) is an artist and Sonia (Inga’s daughter) is a poet. They serve as a cathartic instrument in Miranda dealing with her Haitian past and Sonia in dealing with the death of her father.

The setting of this novel is shortly after 9-11 and references to this event are seen mostly in relation to Erik's niece, Sonia. Sonia was an adolescent attending class in a school with close proximity to Ground Zero when the planes crashed. There are also references to war – Iraq. Every American who is living at this time in history has been affected by these two incredibly off-putting, topsy-turvy events. Our sense of stability has been shaken. I don't only mean because of governmental decisions, but something has been changed in our core. Inga says upon visiting her childhood home, "It's so familiar it's strange." That's how New York felt for me, and many others after 9-11. We laughed, we dined, we survived, but at a cost and at a loss.

One kernel that sums up this book for me are the following words, written after Sonia has a melt down. "If anything had changed it was that Sonia knew she could survive the power of her own emotion. And so could her mother" - And it is this type of realization that takes this book out of the realm of Erik or Inga or the Davidsen family, or New Yorkers who lived through 9-11 or widowers, and speaks universally

Siri did you include the events of 9-11 and Iraq to give the story a sense of time and place or did it was included for a more significant reason? "The novel is set in the year 2003. It would be impossible *not* to mention September 11<sup>th</sup> or the invasion of Iraq. But these events are part of a much larger and insistent themes in the novel – psychic trauma – of which there are many examples. Erik's father suffers from flashbacks after the war. His grandfather has nightmares after he loses his farm. Erik's niece Sonya, is traumatized by what she's seen from her schoolroom window the day of the attacks in New York. The novel's epigraph from Rumi speaks directly to this theme: "Don't turn away. Keep looking at the bandaged place. That's where the light enter you." Ain't that the truth!

I recommend this book to those who want to read something more intelligent than the average. I reread it to see what I missed the first time. There are plenty of layers and the surface story is very entertaining. It is also absolutely the story of a Norwegian immigrant family who survived the Depression and WWII, like many of our readers. The use of the inner life, is also very Scandinavian, we see this in Bergman's films and Ibsen's plays. It is intriguing to see how much this novel goes to the psyche; to what forms us, how we survive and how we gravitate to the unknown, even if it is painful and shocking.