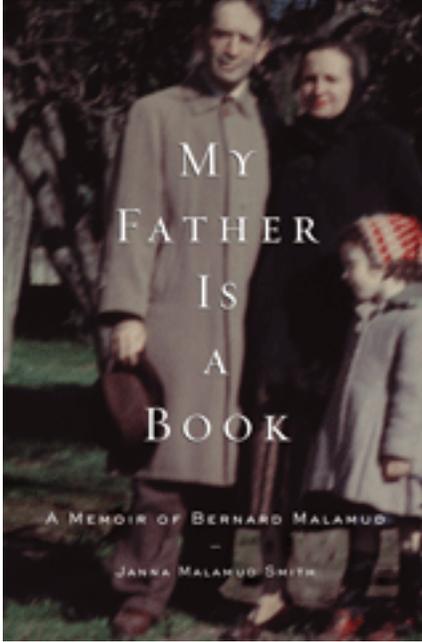


Press Release



My Father Is a Book

by Janna Malamud Smith

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"Smith offers a profound portrait of a loving father, a writer whose struggles with his own frailties fueled enduring works of literature." — *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"Smith exquisitely captures 'the particular psychic pleasure and confusion' of being the daughter of novelist/short story writer Bernard Malamud." — *Kirkus Reviews*

About the Book

The novels and short stories of Bernard Malamud have made an important and lasting impression on readers. From his Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, *The Fixer*, to his perhaps best loved *The Natural* to *The Assistant*, which was included in *Time's* list of the 100 best novels from 1923 to the present, Malamud's writing illustrates eternal themes of suffering and redemption, irony and comedy. Above all, his stirring works of fiction always feature memorable characters.

While his legacy as a Jewish-American writer is well known, there has never been an in-depth look into Malamud's personal life until now. On the twentieth anniversary of his death, his daughter, Janna Malamud Smith, explores her father's life in *My Father Is a Book: A Memoir of Bernard Malamud* (Houghton Mifflin, March 15, 2006). She draws an insightful and very intimate portrait in this book, the first to tell his story.

In the two decades following her father's death, Smith realized that the once overshadowing memory of her father was in danger of disappearing. After coming to terms with her grief, raising a family, and building a career of her own, Smith finally felt ready to share the private side of her father's life. Armed with a unique perspective and access to Malamud's unpublished letters and journals, Smith has truly preserved her father and his legacy: his childhood in a struggling immigrant family in New York, his years as a humble college professor in Oregon, and his triumphant rise to literary fame.

Smith examines his early journals, the source of inspiration for many of his famous works. Among love letters and records of daily activities, we see how the characters in his books often embody qualities of his real-life friends and family. Smith also remembers the special relationship she and her father had, one of charm, humor, and devotion. She delves into the background of a literary family, observing similarities and differences between herself and her father and chronicling the good times and the bad.

My Father Is a Book is a fascinating look at one of America's literary geniuses, offering the personal thoughts and experiences behind Malamud's fiction. More than that, Smith's memoir is a touching tribute to father-daughter relationships, a beautiful example of a daughter's journey revisiting memories, reliving conversations, and ultimately accepting who her father was — and who she is.

About the Author

Janna Malamud Smith is the author of two New York Times Notable Books, *A Potent Spell* and *Private Matters*, which was a Barnes and Noble "Discover Great New Writers" pick. She has written for the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe*, among other publications.

A Conversation with Janna Malamud Smith

What made you decide to write a memoir of your father, Bernard Malamud?

I'd thought for many years about writing this book — really since 1986, when my father died. Dad was a very large presence in my life, and our relationship was a story I wanted — needed — to tell, in the way one sometimes needs to tell stories in order to make sense of one's own life as well as a parent's life.

My father was so pained by his childhood that he tried hard to put a firewall between us and it. He didn't want us to know how tough it had been. And I had pretty much honored his wish. But as I grew older, I found that I did want to know about his past — about the thirty-eight years he'd lived before I met him. Once I became interested, I found treasure troves of unpublished letters and early notebooks. In the book I weave my memories together with the primary sources.

Why now?

Two things made this the right time. My mother, who is the greatest living authority on my father's life, is not getting any younger. As she moved through her eighties, I began to realize that she possessed a lot of information about my father's life — and her own with him — that would be lost when she died. I felt a desire and an obligation to try to learn some of what she knew. So my wish to protect her privacy tipped into a wish to glean her knowledge while I could.

I also realized that time had gradually offered me enough emotional distance to be able to contemplate my father more frankly. I'm older now than he was when he published his best-selling novel *The Fixer*. He was fifty-two then, and he seemed quite gray-haired to

me. So I didn't want to wait a lot longer. You know Faulkner's line "The past isn't over, it isn't even past"? Well, that's true on one level. Freud said the same thing when he pointed out that the unconscious is timeless. But we often do lose important details as time passes. The twentieth anniversary of my father's death is March 18, 2006. Frankly, I find it hard to believe he's been dead that long!

What makes his life worth a memoir?

Ironically, some people now remember Bernard Malamud as the guy who wrote the too-serious alternative ending to Robert Redford's great upbeat movie *The Natural*! And *The Natural*, published in 1952, was my father's first novel.

What people might not know is that in October 2005, *Time* included Dad's novel *The Assistant* on its list of the one hundred best English-language books published between 1923 and 2000. (I'm not sure why they picked 1923 — possibly it was the year *Time* started publishing.) But that's out of thousands of twentieth-century novels published in England, Canada, and America!

Twenty years after he died, all my father's books are still in print and are taught and read all over the world. He won a National Book Award for his first short story collection, *The Magic Barrel*, and a National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Fixer*. People approach me all the time to tell me how much reading Malamud affected their lives. His short stories are very beautiful and still much anthologized.

His success is even more interesting when you see how hard he had to struggle to achieve it. His is a quintessentially American story: Bernard Malamud was a poor boy from a terribly distressed family who decided at fifteen or so that he wanted to become a great writer. His mother, who was mentally ill, had just died in an asylum. His father was a failed storekeeper, illiterate in English. (I don't think either of his parents had more than an elementary-school education in Ukraine before they emigrated.) In fact Yiddish, not English, was Dad's own first language. But, though penniless, he had the good fortune to grow up in Brooklyn, New York, when the public schools were first-rate. So at the height of the Great Depression, by seeking education, he earned himself an exit ticket from his parents' hopeless world. He had talent, and he devoted his life to realizing it and to offering his children a better life than he had had. He was an interesting, idealistic, complex person, and he would have been a terrific character in one of his own tales.

You have already published two books. How did your own writing affect your interest in writing about his life?

While I'm no Bernard Malamud, I certainly appreciate his great effort to write well. I love writing nonfiction, and as I have spent more time working at it, I have come to feel the kinship of sharing a craft with him. I suppose, not surprisingly, as I have understood more about the writing process, the knowledge has contributed to my growing curiosity about his life. It has created a new vantage point: I have become a participant in the work that was his life's passion. Dad loved writing stories. He lived to write, really. And writing was his way of making sense of his world. You might say he gave me that tool as a gift.

But wasn't one of your books on privacy? Haven't you written a lot about why families of famous people want privacy?

Yes, it's a topic close to my heart. And for a long time I needed privacy in order to build my own life apart from his and to find out what I could and could not accomplish when away from him. But privacy is really less about telling or not telling than about having control over the telling. And memoir writing gives you a lot of control over your story.

Do you think you're violating your father's privacy by telling things about him that he hid?

If he were alive, I might be. I suspect he would not be happy with some of what I've written. He much preferred to be the teller and not the one told about! Yet I also think he would understand my wish to put him on paper. In writing the memoir I have tried hard to speak openly about aspects of his life he hid, but also to honor the privacy of living people.

My Father Is a Book book. Read 9 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. On the twentieth anniversary of Bernard Malamud's death, Janna M...
In glowing praise of My Father Is a Book, Susan Cheever -- who also wrote memorably of her own father, John Cheever -- says, "This loving portrait of a writer's family from the inside describes good times and difficulties with affection and candor and provides a fascinating backstory for Malamud's great fiction." ...more. The book mocked me. It made me question if I was successful in my father's eyes. I wanted to make him proud to have me as his daughter, because if I am proud of anything in my life, it is of having him as my father. Was he reading it a second time trying to discover what he missed? If the book said, "Do this and your daughter will turn out like this?" did I actually turn out that way? If I grow up to be half the parent my father is, I will have been successful. I will buy a book about "How to Mother a Successful Son/Daughter" because maybe it'll teach me what he learned. I'll make my husband read one so that my daughter will be twice as lucky as me with her own father and grandfather there to raise her. My father's book is there, haunting me from thousands of miles away.