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ABOUT SCHMIDT

By Louis Begley

Alfred A. Knopf. 274 pp.

Sigmund Freud believed the twin requisites for a fulfilling life were the abilities to love and to work. Without the capacity to experience intimacy or function productively, psychic damage was inevitable.

Albert Schmidt, in Louis Begley's sensitively observed fourth novel, faces life transitions that jeopardize both sources of happiness. Entering his sixties, he has just lost his wife to a protracted illness and he has taken early retirement from the posh Manhattan law firm where he had been a partner.

The balm for these deep losses could lie in the palatial rusticity of the million-dollar Bridgehampton home he shares with his daughter Charlotte. But Charlotte is a disappointment, a "smug, overworked yuppie" public relations executive who has little time for Schmidt because she's too busy "explaining to the public why tobacco companies are really a misunderstood group of good guys manufacturing a fine, useful product." And she has her own wound to inflict: she intends to marry Jon Riker, a junior partner in Schmidt's former law firm, a narrow, superficial young man who irritates Schmidt in every way.

Lonely and useless, the forlorn Schmidt wonders what point he can find to the rest of his life. But there's too much verve in Schmidt, and Begley is far too astute, for this tale to degenerate into the Poor Little Rich Codger that Begley pointedly sets up.

Schmidt's nature is as finely nuanced as the social strata of his opulent Hamptons. His losses and needs are affecting, but his own flaws, which he takes for virtues, aggravate his isolation. His spoken and written words to Charlotte (a Harvard summa cum laud) are as cold as a legal brief. And while Schmidt dislikes his daughter's fiance for his callow rigidity, he dislikes him most because he is a Jew.

Despite abundant evidence to the contrary, Schmidt can't believe he's anti-Semitic. After all, his best friend and former college roommate, the prominent film producer Gil Blackman, is a Jew.

Nor can he believe he's a racist, not when he's attracted to a 20 year-old Brooklyn-born Puerto Rican waitress. She (and even Riker's warm if officious psychiatrist mother) become active means by which Schmidt will rage against the dying of his libido. That the happily married Blackman also feels compelled to take a 24 year-old mistress makes him Gloucester to Schmidt's Lear, universalizing this late-life male crisis, this need to prove themselves still capable of a takedown or two in their doomed match with Father Time.

What emerges, then, is a poignant study of aging centered on a man whose flaws become both sinister and sympathetic. In an era of encroaching coarseness, where civility dissolves and boxer shorts have become an outerwear fashion statement, Schmidt summons in us remembrance of elegance past, a Rhet Butler desperate to find some place where grace still exists. He inspires both commiseration and

censure, like Jean Renoir's Erich von Stroheim lamenting a Europe lost by the aristocracy to those of lesser breeding. Is he a cultured patrician, a supercilious snob, or both?

Whichever he is, Begley succeeds wonderfully in making us care.

Despite a mannered refusal to put dialogue within quotes, this is a beautifully written novel. Begley inevitably finds the perfect detail to convey attitude: Schmidt sprinkling salt on french fries because vacuous late middle age hardly bears preserving, or taking bittersweet comfort in thinking he'll never need to replace his dinner jacket or overcoat again because "their remaining useful life is longer than mine."

Vivid mini-scenes, as when Schmidt recalls an affair with his daughter's au pair or rides beside a foul-smelling man on the Hamptons bus, help the novel pulse with felt life. Begley employs a fertile variety of narrative techniques, such as relating key moments in entries from Schmidt's journal. And he spices the prose copiously with allusions to Eliot, Fitzgerald, Conrad and Shakespeare, making it as erudite and it is moving.

Undefeated because he goes on trying, Schmidt at best slenderly knows himself. But we come to know him well, and we find him as true, as funny and sad, as life itself.