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FUGITIVE SPRING: A Memoir

By Deborah Digges

Alfred A. Knopf. 225 pp.

Of all literary forms, the memoir most brazenly dares its reader to ask, "Why should I bother?"

It stands between the novel and the biography, with neither's claim on our trust. Of the novel we expect truth rather than fact, a stirring revelation of human character. Of the biography we expect a solidly researched account of a noteworthy life and its themes.

Of the memoir we expect, and get, distortion. It is the tale our memory embraces.

Yet, since our past is what is remembered rather than what actually happened, that distortion becomes its own artwork: the writer's attempt to shape meaning onto experience. Her struggle reflects our own.

If 40 is the old age of youth and 50 the youth of old age, our forties seems the propitious decade to reconstruct our life and discern its pattern. That summer task done, we feel prepared to enter what Browning calls "the last of life, for which the first was made."

As with most creative people, 41 year-old poet Deborah Digges' life is remarkable less for its contents than its fluidity, how clearly she sees the constant confluence of interior experience and outer events. Evocatively related in *Fugitive Spring*, her insight into how inner tensions forged her strengths and achievements becomes a joy and a lesson.

One of ten children raised on the Missouri apple farm where her father, Dr. Everett Sugarbaker, maintained his cancer clinic, Digges was constantly surrounded by both ripening and dying. In her sisters' hand-me-down nurse's uniform, she assisted her father in caring for the terminally ill. Like her sisters, she would disappoint his hopes of a medical career. But, as she writes both here and in an early poem, "Laws of Falling Bodies," by watching her father work she learned "how strong the body is" and how the healer's art was a kind of lovemaking "as he witnessed the pain lifting."

Her own pains were rooted in anonymity and alienation: the sixth of ten children, a disappointing student, a war protester married to an Air Force pilot flying over Vietnam while she stayed with their son in the dour desolation of West Texas. Out of "the confused politics of the time (1972)" and "twenty-two years learning how to make myself heard," Digges began writing poetry.

Describing her childhood in the apple orchard, Digges blends the poet's sensuality with the scientist's curiosity. She sounds at times like our most lyrical naturalist, Annie Dillard: "If you give a man gone blind a peach, and then a pear, and then an apple, why would he choose the last? Of the three, the peach's shape is the most perfectly global. Its surfaces are the most fleshlike . . . and why not the pear with its form connoting ripeness, fullness, like the last days of pregnancy? . . . The apple is the most tactilely strange and various of all, and solid, so that you trust it in your hands."

Fugitive Spring has life's organic pattern without art's well-made tidiness. In art, as Chekhov noted, if you introduce a gun in Act One it must go off before the end of Act Three. In life, not everything ties up so neatly.

In Digges' life, some characters remain enigmatic. A haunting melancholy hovers over her mother. In the touching chapter "The Daughters of Hannah," Digges relates how at age nine she accompanied her mother to a bible class she taught at a women's prison, yet even as Mrs. Sugarbaker delivered her sanctimonious lecture she grew in her daughter's eyes more pitiable than the inmates. At 65, after ten children, she left her husband but remained away only as long as the money she gleaned redeeming soda bottle deposits held out. Digges concludes of her mother: "she wished she were someone else."

Digges, too, often wished she were something or somewhere else—a boy rather than a girl, a good student rather than a poor one, out of college rather than in, heard rather than lost in a crowd. While she does not write this wise and appealing memoir to save herself from being her mother, Digges loudly and proudly manages in its pages to define who she is.