Two-and-a-half parents

A memoir of a literary family that represents ‘a therapy of sorts’

Karl Miller died in 2014. His obituaries describe an outstanding portfolio of literary, journalistic and academic achievements. He was literary editor of the Spectator and the New Statesman, Editor of the Listener and the London Review of Books, which he co-founded, and Lord Northcliffe Professor of Modern English Literature at University College London. It is too early for the first biography to appear, but not too early to hope that someone somewhere is already at work on a Life of the critic and man of letters who was (in his friend Andrew O’Hagan’s words) “our connection to the 19th century”. In the meantime, Miller’s son Sam has written Fathers, a book that began as a funeral address and became “a therapy of sorts”.

Sam provides a moving account of the circumstances in which Karl wrote the last of his many thousands of book reviews. Early in 2014, he had agreed to review Hugo Williams’s collection of poems, I Knew the Bride for the Spectator, but illness prevented him. Mark Amory called from the magazine in August to say that he wanted a piece by every previous Spectator literary editor (Miller held the post from 1958 to 61) for his valedictory issue: please could Karl oblige? Karl and Sam read Williams’s poems aloud and Sam took notes at the bedside, imagining that this might be their first literary collaboration, “a ghost-written book review”. But when he suggested this, Karl looked troubled, got out of bed and wrote his own review, which was published with “not a word altered” four days before he died.

Sam presents his father as a born critic, describing a working-class Scottish schoolboy who noted down the title of everything he read in his journal and awarded marks out of 100: Hamlet came top with 95; Point Counter Point got 85; narrowly beaten by Sons and Lovers, with 86. Looking through Karl’s juvenile marginalia, Sam is amused to find Edgar Allan Poe’s “To Helen” described as a “surprisingly fine poem”. But from his filial point of view, the evolution of his father’s literary sensibility is overshadowed by other interests: women and football. These two, unusually combined, are at the heart of Sam’s portrait of Karl.

In his memoirs, Rebecca’s Vest (1993) and Dark Horses (1998), Karl describes some of the adventures of “Carnal Miller”, which began when he took a job as an extra in Verdi’s Macbeth during the first Edinburgh Festival in 1947. There he became friends with Ernest Berk, a choreographer, and his wife Lotte, who were refugees from Nazi Germany. Lotte was eighteen years older than Karl, and when they travelled to Cambridge together, so that Karl could meet his future tutor F. R. Leavis, they became lovers. In a hospital waiting room, nearly seventy years later, Sam asks whether or not Karl was simultaneously the lover of the Berk’s teenage daughter, Esther: “Just at that moment, the man sitting across from us, whose most distinctive feature was a transparent tube which emerged from his nose and disappeared behind his back, stood up abruptly and moved to another part of the waiting room. My father nodded at the empty chair”. But there was no further discussion. Sam notes that after writing his memoirs in the 1990s, Karl destroyed his early diaries:

The empty covers survive, as a frustrating reminder of something I will never be able to read. I suppose I should not mind – and yet I feel they would have provided me with clues as I sought to unravel my father’s complex attitude towards sexual fidelity, and towards what might be seen as conventional monogamous relationships.

While he accepts that “few parents want to talk about their sex lives with their children, and even fewer children want to hear”, Sam has a special reason for wanting to understand Karl’s. When Sam was fifteen, helping his mother, Jane Miller, paint his bedroom, she turned to him and said: “Your real father is . . . was Tony White”. White was a family friend, known to Karl and Jane since their student days in Cambridge in the early 1950s, who had recently died in his fourties. After this revelation, “a great deal went unsaid, for many decades”. His mother’s words set off “a slow-motion cascade of feelings and reactions and consequences”. Karl knew that Sam knew he was not his biological father, but they did not discuss the matter directly for many years. Sam’s older brother and younger sister were not told until they were adults in the 1980s. At first, Sam’s attitude was “this changes nothing”, but in the wake of Karl’s death he has decided to talk and write more openly about his own origins. His book is cleverly structured as a meditation on memory and secrecy, dedicated to his parents, “all two-and-a-half of them”.

The first mention of Tony White in Fathers comes in a quotation from Karl’s memoirs, in which he refers to Cambridge friends he has already outlined: “The painter Rory McEwan was to develop cancer. Tony White died of a pulmonary embolism, after a football injury. Nick Tomalin, serving as a war correspondent, was killed by a heat-seeking missile in the Middle East”. Throughout the first section of Fathers, White is a peripheral figure: co-founder with Karl of the Battersea Park football team and a regular visitor to the Millers’ family home, where Sam remembers growing up amid a continuous party of literati and football enthusiasts. He describes walking in on his parents sobbing and comforting each other just after they had received the news of White’s death: “I felt like an intruder, and said how sorry I was and retreated from the room”. White’s funeral on January 20, 1976, was Sam’s first: “I was more intrigued than desolate – though desolation could be seen on the faces of almost everyone there”. Constructed from family memories and anecdotes, this section is shot through with heavy hints about the reveal that comes as no surprise at the beginning of section two. When Sam turns his attention from the life of Karl Miller to that of Tony White, he is immediately aware of an “equality issue”.

Do I need to treat these two fathers of mine with some level of equality? My easy, instinctive answer is a simple “No”. I am less interested in Tony himself – and more interested in what he meant to my parents, and (this is secondary)
H ad Diana Trilling (1905–96) lived to see her biography, she would doubtless be contacting reviewers and editors with complaints about Natalie Robins’s version of her “untold journey”. That not Robins, whose earlier books were on such topical issues as homoeopathy, the “hidden hazards” of hospitals and the FBI’s “war on freedom of expression”, hasn’t done her best to present a positive image of Trilling. But Robins’s knowledge of the context within which her subject operated seems at best sketchy. Beyond dropping numerous names, she has little to say about the illustrious “New York Intellectuals” of the Lionel and Diana Trilling circle, tutoring for any serious consideration of their writings or their ideological positions a string of anecdotes and reminiscences drawn prima\-rily from the “sixty hefty boxes” of Diana’s own papers (available in that Columbia University archive: letters, diaries, interviews, drafts of short stories, and even rejection notes from various editors).

The portrait that emerges from this paper trail is of a difficult, at times unpleasant woman – self-absorbed, arrogant, catty and competitive – who managed, sooner or later, to alienate just about everyone she knew. Robins has consulted such colleagues and acquaintances as are still alive and willing to be interviewed, but their accounts do little to enlarge us to the subject. She has also had access to the letters of Diana’s famous husband, the critic and Columbia professor Lionel Trilling. But even Lionel’s words don’t help much: in a journal entry shortly after their first meeting in 1927, he wrote, “To note met Diana. Disliked her at first but even in disliked felt attracted”. It’s not clear that this complex of feelings ever wholly changed. Attraction soon gave way to periods of sexual impotence, which caused friction between husband and wife. Lionel frequently referred to Diana throughout their married life, but he never did seem to like her very much.

Diana Rubin was born in New York to an affluent, secularized family of Polish Jewish immigrants. Her father was in the women’s hosiery business; until the stock market crash of 1929, the family had a chauffeur and full-time household help. Diana attended Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, major- ing in Art History. The custom for middle- class women in those days was to return home after graduation and wait to get married. On the blind date on which she met the twenty- two-year-old Lionel, in a speakeasy, she recalls their drinking Bullfrogs and Alexand- ders, the latter “a cocktail of gin, crème de cacao, and whipped cream”. Lionel was still a PhD student at Columbia and his father, who sold furs, was less affluent than Diana’s, but they were soon engaged. With little financial help from the Rubins, they married in 1929.

The Trillings settled in a series of Upper West Side apartments, mostly in Morningside Heights. Lionel soon became an instructor at Columbia and, by 1939, the first tenured Jew- ish professor in the English department. Before long, the couple were at the centre of what was to be called the Puritan Review gang – the journal was founded by William Phillips and Phillip Rahv in 1934 – although they never quite shared the Trotskyite sentiments of their compatriots. They declared themselves “liberal- ists”, by which they meant persons on the Left devoted to working-class causes and some form of “radical change” but opposed to “any form of despotism”, which inevitably included communism. In The Liberal Imagination (1950), which contains such classic essays as “Manners, Morals, and the Novel” and “Freed and Literature”, Lionel tried to forge a middle way between the “engaged” literature of the New Masses and the strictly literary analysis of the New Critics. Throughout her life, Diana was a vocal anti-communist.

Approaching thirty without a career, Diana discovered that literature interested her more than did art and that her ambition was to be a writer, like her husband. In the meantime, she had become engaged by the artistic refugees from Europe; psychoanalysis. Both Diana and Lionel were in analysis most of their adult lives. Diana herself went through seven different analysts (two died along the way), includ- ing Marianne Kris – the wife of the prominent analyst Ernst Kris – who happened to be Marilyn Monroe’s analyst not long before her suicide.

It is all but impossible for readers today to understand the pivotal role psychoanalysis played in mid-century Manhattan, especially among non-Jewish Jews like the Trillings. Most of the New York analysts were cultured European refugees from Hitler’s Vienna; many of them had personally known Freud. (I myself went to school with the Kris children Anna and Tony, both of whom were also to become prominent analysts.) When Diana Trilling finally gave birth, at the age of forty- three, to their only child Jim, it was understood that as soon as feasible, the boy would undergo the “play therapy” that constituted child ana- lysis (Jim’s initiation took place when he was seven). All three of the children suffered from multiple neuroses – Lionel and Jim from fits of rage, Diana from acrophobia (fear of heights) and panic attacks. No one ever expected to be “cured” – for Lionel, Freudian theory became primarily a literary tool, central to his cultural readings of the nineteenth- century novel – but in Diana’s case, satisfac- tion of any kind remained elusive. Neverthe- less – and this too was characteristic of the Trilling milieu – despite little flirtations and a vague belief in “free love”, Diana never seri- ously considered divorce. The Trillings were a team.

As Robins tells it, Diana’s break came in 1941 when she overheard a telephone call between Lionel and Margaret Marshall, the lit- erary editor of the Nation, which was beginning to convert freelancers to contribute unsigned reviews of novels. Diana immediately volunteered and Lionel agreed that she would be perfect for the job. Within the year, she had her own signed column at the Nation and was beginning to con- tribute articles and sketches to other journals.

How did success come so easily? One of the great ironies of Diana’s career (although Rob- ins has little to say on the subject) is that she was hardly a literary intellectual. While Lionel was writing on Matthew Arnold, Henry James

whether he might tell me anything about myself. I have never felt for Tony what I feel for my father.

Sam’s parenthetical “this is secondary” captures the struggle at the centre of his book. He is wrestling with the complexity of the previous generation’s stories, trying to understand the adult lives that shaped his, and searching for signs of his own importance in the drama. While he is respectful of the friends who keep “The Ballad of Tony White” alive, and retrospectively wry about “the medium-sized troop of secret and half- secret lovers” that attended White’s funeral, his primary interest is not in the mysterious thespian, translator and would-be author who died young, but of much promise unful- filled. Instead, Sam scans White’s journals and correspondence for references to himself and finds only two: a simple mention at the end of a “humdrum” postcard, and this sen- tence: “A long-drawn-out affair with Jane ended when she found she was pregnant, possibly by me”. Poignantly and self-know- ingly, Sam remarks: “I think I would have been pleased if there was more than that”.

Sam acknowledges his debt to Jane Miller who has, somewhat “tremulously”, given him access to her diaries, letters and unpublished novel, Tales of an Adultress. Information from Jane is more vivid than anything Sam finds in his fathers’ archives. She describes visiting a psychiatrist in order to obtain the necessary medical opinion that terminating her pregnancy would be in the interests of her mental health. After Jane explained to the psychiatrist what had happened and that the two possible fathers were on friendly terms and played football together, he remarked: “I think you’re the football here”. At which point she decided against abortion. When she was giving birth to Sam at home, Karl and Tony White were downstairs relaxing after a day at the football: “My mother thinks only of sarcasm, of “ordinary people”, non-artists, fitters-in, good at unimportant things like driving cars, using computers and tidying up. She knows and regrets that there are no secrets to be prised out of me. Perhaps Jane Miller’s mother already knew, and for some reason did not count, the big secret at the centre of her daughter’s family life; that Jane’s mother was a non-bohemianish?”

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and the nineteenth-century novel of manners, Diana was dismissive of much of the new literature that came across her desk. Animal Farm, she declared, "simply reproduces the historical situation in Russia without the addition of any new moral or political insights"; Brideshead Revisited was "incoherent and "boring". She complained that the Virginia Woolf of The Common Reader "always takes refuge in her female sensibility".

Her preference was for popular writers such as Angela Thirkell, whom she praises as "one of the great haters on the contemporary scene". She admired Jim Corbett's Man Eaters of Kumaon, a bestseller about the hunting and killing of tigers in India. She wrote short stories under the pseudonym Margaret Sayers. One such story (never published), "The Marriage of Elsie and John", was about a wedding reception spoiled by irritable relatives (not unlike her own). Diana’s "greatest wish", Robins notes, was to be published in the New Yorker. Her pride was "that she could write with the same seriousness for Junior Bazaar" – for which she was writing a monthly column in 1946–7 – "or Vogue as for Partisan Review". Such statements are made without the slightest touch of irony, Robins seemingly not connecting Diana’s philistinism to her difficulties with the "Partisan girls". Hannah Arendt, she cites Diana as complaining, "never said hello to me". The same accusation was made against Mary McCarthy, though there is no evidence that either woman had designs on Lionel. The problem was not sexual but intellectual: Midge Dectar, the wife of Norman Podhoretz, once referred to Diana as "an outcast", unfit for "a serious community where people speak seriously to one another".

It was after Lionel’s death in 1975 that she came into her own. For one thing, the feminist revolution was on her side even though she herself was critical of feminism, making vituperative comments about Germaine Greer and Jill Johnston. But the larger public now saw her – as does her biographer – as a woman writer too long eclipsed by her famous husband. It was now, feminists felt, her turn.

Diana’s one full-length book (the others were essay collections or memoirs) was Mrs Harris: The death of the Scarsdale diet doctor (1981), the story of the headmistress of the exclusive Madeira School for Girls in Virginia, who killed her unfaithful physician lover Herman Tarnower. With this lurid tabloid story turned courtroom melodrama, Diana seems to have finally found her métier. She admired Jim Corbett’s "one of the great haters on the contemporary scene". She complained that the Virginia Woolf of The Common Reader "always takes refuge in her female sensibility".

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Diana’s best essays, to my mind, were two about campus events. "The Other Night at Columbia: A report from the academy" for Partisan Review (Spring 1959), although Robins erroneously lists it as 1958) is a droll narrative about the famous Beat reading, when those one-time Columbia students Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg (the latter was expelled in 1945) charmed the crowd, even as older audience members like Diana (who went out of curiosity because Lionel had been Ginsberg’s mentor) remained sceptical. W. H. Auden scolded her for even attending. "On the Steps of Low Library", published in 1968, was more significant. Here she tried to give an even-handed account of the great Columbia riot of that year, their causes and their cost to the university. The essay is too long but it respects the complexity of the events and is a serious piece of scholarship. Again, however, it received harsh criticism in many quarters, for example from Robert Lowell, who complained that "all’s twisted in the current of ignorant, unseeing didacticism, in the rattled sentences".

So it went for the rest of Diana’s long but not always happy life (she died in 1996). The low point, to my mind, comes less in the continuing battles with writers and editors than in the strange behaviour of both Trillings during the Second World War. Second-generation Polish Jewish immigrants, they seem to have experienced the years between 1939 and 1945 primarily as a period of success. It was then that Diana got her big break with the Nation, and Lionel produced several admired publications, including his book on E. M. Forster. In these years, the Jewish refugee intellectuals were arriving from Europe in New York daily, many on special visas to become professors at the University in Exile founded by Alvin Johnson, the President of the New School of Social Research (who was not Jewish). On the evidence of Robins’s book, Diana had nothing to say on such subjects, though it may be the biographer’s omission. Sticking mainly to gossip, Natalie Robins begins each chapter with an epigraph from Lionel, for example (Chapter 13): “D’s anger at my ‘betrayal’ of our past – for you it’s research”. The next morning she speaks bitterly of my ‘depersonalization’ of her, of myself”. Of such epigraphs, this soap-opera story is made. Diana Trilling, problematic as she was, deserves better.