

A Poke in the Public Eye

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Janna Malamud Smith has good reason to write about the value of privacy.

PRIVATE MATTERS

In Defense of the Personal Life.
By Janna Malamud Smith.
278 pp. Reading, Mass.:
Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
\$22.

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JANNA MALAMUD SMITH, a practicing psychotherapist, is far too ambivalent about privacy to be its strong defender and just ambivalent enough to be its brilliant expositor. "Private Matters" begins, ironically, with the unveiling of some painful facts about the life of a young woman growing up in the home of Bernard Malamud: "My father sought privacy because without it he could not create fiction, and our family was organized to protect this need. We hesitated before we knocked on the door of his study; we tiptoed through the late afternoons, diving at phones to prevent a second ring, so he could nap and prepare for an evening of reading; we accepted that he distanced himself from his relatives and rarely spoke about his past."

After Malamud's death in 1986, his daughter felt a deep sense of unease about opening up his personal life to a prurient public eye. She identified with his desire to guard his home life and family background against what Henry

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James referred to as the "post-mortem exploiter" who might try to reduce his transcendent and imaginative writings to the merely factual aspects of his biography. She dealt with her father's fame by seeking anonymity (she was grateful, she tells us, to acquire the surname Smith, which she viewed as a kind of privacy). "Private Matters" reads like a successful therapy, in which the spirit of her father is finally made to rest. It is both a personal rumination and a gorgeously written anecdotal cultural history of the emergence and the fragile sanctity of the modern creative self, and of the development of the right to close the door, pull the shade and shut out the gaze of the community.

Smith, who believes that most facts are "complicated and paradoxical," fully dissects the idea of privacy, exposing every one of its intimate parts: solitude; autonomy; freedom of choice; the wish to have total control over what is known about you; "the freedom to say and do things with people you love that you would not say or do if someone else were present"; the impulse to preserve some secret haven for the mind where, for the sake of creativity, the imagination is protected from questions that it is not yet prepared to address. Smith fully recognizes the downside of the right to draw a curtain around the self and to be alone. Shielded from criticism, the very same impulse that cultivates the creative soul also harbors mediocrity, permits dark and monstrous acts and nurtures shame. A book that begins with the sense of anxiety that her dead father's persona is going to be "tampered with by someone else's appraisal" ends with an acknowledgment that sometimes

"the biography is more valuable than the subject's wish not to be written about" and that "sometimes telling all about someone is healing rather than harmful."

Janna Smith has an eloquent analytic mind and she is a good storyteller, a pleasing combination. The book contains the best accounts I have read concerning the emotion of "shame" (which, Smith asserts, is about "the wish to remain lovable, and the fear that if truly known, one will be found lacking") and concerning "reserve" ("without the capacity and the freedom to stay silent, to guard one's psychic privacy, there is no possibility for authentic relationships"), a quality that has more or less disappeared from our tell-all world.

MUCH of the book is an anecdotal history of the shift from one cultural sensibility — "rural and traditional, communal" — to another: "urban, modern and separate." There is the story of an abashed and solitary Robert Louis Stevenson, who had to share a room with a communally oriented married couple in a tiny hotel in a French village. There is the story of the adultery trial of the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher in 1875, not only a prototype for all subsequent public scandals but the original opportunity for the press to "compensate for the loss of personal surveillance once possible in small towns." There is a chapter in which Dr. Jekyll meets Freud (just tell me everything that comes to mind), and another on Bill Clinton and Presidential privacy. "Private Matters" is what anthropologists call "thick description" at its best.