

Diary of a sad housewife

In her memoir, **Augusten Burroughs' mom is a slave to depression and to the typewriter**

THE LONG JOURNEY HOME, by Margaret Robison. Spiegel & Grau, 381 pp., \$26.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to *Newsday*

In 1971, Margaret Robison — then a depressed, desperate 36-year-old mother of two — had a dream. Though she never could remember what the dream was about, she woke from it sure of one thing — she was meant to be a writer. She began scribbling images from her Georgia childhood on a legal pad, images that would later fuel several books of poems. “June bugs. Roscoe the pig. Grandmother churning butter on the shady side porch.”

Not long after this moment of self-discovery, Robison split up with her abusive, alcoholic husband, began experimenting with bisexuality and had a psychotic break. Her commitment to writing became even fiercer during a stay in the Massachusetts state psychiatric hospital, and she never stopped. She wrote so constantly that the younger of her two sons would recall in his memoir, “Unless I was holding a spare typewriter ribbon . . . she had no use for me.”

She did, however, have a few other pastimes, documented by the older son in his own memoir: “She would talk non-stop and smoke nonstop and go faster and faster and faster and then surprise you by doing something outlandish, like eating cigarette butts in the middle of a conversation. Is it hereditary? I wondered.”

Well, maybe not the cigarette-munching, but memoir-writing must be. Margaret Robison’s younger child is Augusten Burroughs, who was born Christopher Robison but changed his



FOTOLIA PHOTO BY ANDRZEJ TOKARSKI

name at 18 to dissociate himself from his hated parents. He’s the author of six bestselling memoirs, including “Running With Scissors,” which recounts, among other horrors, how his mother sent him to live with her bizarre therapist and his family. Burroughs is now a bona fide literary celebrity — and must hold the record for most vicious decimation of one’s parents in a print medium. A lawsuit lodged by the family portrayed in “Scissors,” a feature film directed by Ryan Murphy (“Glee”) and a memoir by his brother, John Elder Robison — “Look Me in

the Eye: My Life With Asperger’s” — have only cemented Burroughs’ renown.

One might imagine that Margaret Robison’s book would rebut the nightmarish portrait painted by both sons. Well, not really. In fact, I ended up preferring the narcissistic, melodramatic, thrillingly awful mom described by Augusten Burroughs to the New Age sad sack we come to know in these pages. “The Long Journey Home” is a 432-page slog through breakdowns and psychosis; through a mean, sexually brutal marriage; through poor decisions, helplessness and hopelessness. All this involves so much cigarette smoking that you feel the book itself could give you lung cancer.

The story of a repressed, abused mid-20th century housewife going mad and finding salvation in art and the love of other women is not a new one,

and Robison is not a strong enough writer to make it fresh. An uninspired sentence like “It was a year of family activity and exploration” to describe 1962 is followed by “It was a time of going to faculty parties and art exhibits” to describe 1965. Fast forward to 1980: “Psychotic visions and dreams were intruded on by aides bringing meals on trays.” The English teacher in me wants to scream “passive voice!” The rest of me just wants to scream.

If you’re looking for the juicy comeback to her sons, you’ll have to wait until the last chapter. Even there, she doesn’t argue much, except over details of the time Augusten/Chris caught her in flagrante delicto with the minister’s wife who was her best friend. She expresses some quibbles about when and why she gave legal guardianship of her son to Dr. Turcotte, called Dr. Finch in the boys’ books.

“Whether Chris’s memoirs are fact or fiction,” she concludes with resignation, “I send him love and wish him well as he continues to live his gifted and extraordinary life.”

Robison hasn’t spoken to Burroughs since 2002, when, she says, he blocked her emails. The boys, however, are still in touch, and for a time lived next door to one another in Massachusetts. But proximity didn’t keep family relations from intruding on the most important thing in life, she reports: “John Elder rarely saw or communicated with Chris, who spent most of his time inside writing on his computer.”

Isn’t this the spare-typewriter-ribbon thing all over again? The Robison family has alcoholism, psychosis and domestic violence on its plate, not to mention homosexuality and Asperger’s, but I don’t know if anything has caused them as much grief as writing itself.

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