

Review by
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Parent-child anthologies explore the human family

Anthologist Alberto Manguel's choices are simultaneously idiosyncratic and inspired, representing both the famous — Katherine Mansfield, Daphne du Maurier, William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, Ben Okri — and the unfamiliar.

ALBERTO Manguel is the ideal anthologist. He has read, it seems, everything. He cares passionately about language, storytelling and literature. And he loves reading in the same way that most of us love food or sleep or sex.

Manguel has produced other anthologies, but is perhaps best known for two magisterial works, *A History of Reading* and, with Gianni Guadalupi, *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places*. His most recent gift to readers arrives in two familial parts: 20 stories on the expansive theme of fathers and sons, and 20 on mothers and daughters.

Anthologists are judged as much by what they leave out as what they include. Manguel's choices are simultaneously idiosyncratic and inspired. We do not get Alice Munro, Joyce Carol Oates, John Updike or Ernest Hemingway. But we do get Katherine Mansfield, Daphne du Maurier, William Faulkner and Franz Kafka, as well as a considerable selection of international writers, including Nigerian Ben Okri, Janet Frame from New Zealand, Hannes Meinkema from Holland, and South African Dan Jacobson.

We also get a few writers who were, to me, unfamiliar, including Ethan Canin, a young American represented in *Fathers & Sons* by the startling and enigmatic story *The Year of Getting to Know Us*. The story's scaffolding is the inability or

lack of desire of a father to impart any wisdom to his son. The father's logic is simple: "You don't have to get to know me . . . because one day you're going to grow up and then you're going to be me."

In *Mothers & Daughters*, the exiled Chinese writer Ai Bei is represented by a richly poetic and allusive story, *Green Earth Mother*, one of only four of her stories that has been translated into English. Why is this story so metaphoric, so sensuously compressed? Perhaps it is because, as the story tells us, "People are powerless against the mysteries of Heaven and Earth."

There are many other stories that will appeal to a wide variety of readers. In *Mothers & Daughters*, Carson McCullers is represented by *Breath from the Sky*, which is laden with a profound and wrenching sadness. Constance, a young girl recovering from pleurisy, is taken outside for a visit from her mother: ". . . the

coughing started again. She leaned over the side of the chair, Kleenex in hand, and coughed until the stunted blade of grass on which she had fastened her stare had, like the cracks

FATHERS & SONS
An Anthology
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Edited by Alberto Manguel
.....
Raincoast, 297 pages, \$19.95

MOTHERS & DAUGHTERS
An Anthology
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Edited by Alberto Manguel
.....
Raincoast, 359 pages, \$19.95

in the floor beside her bed, sunk ineffaceably into her memory." Few writers can achieve such tragic frailty.

The Stolen Party, by Argentine Liliana Hecker, is a devastating snippet of life seen through the eyes of a young girl, and leaves the reader suspended in a disturbing and delicate balance. Canadian Bonnie Burnard is

represented by *Women of Influence*, an unflinching "compression of anger and guilt and grief and compassion" that leaves the reader both shaken and uplifted.

In *Fathers & Sons*, the story *Aghwee the Sky Monster*, by Japanese Nobel Prize-winner Kenzaburo Oe, follows the "comic and pathetic journey" of one young man hired by a father to be a companion to his son, who is consumed by delusions and private demons, and who believes that "since I'm not living in present time, I mustn't do anything here in this world that might remain or leave an imprint."

Rohinton Mistry's *Of White Hairs and Cricket* is an affectionate tale of a 14-year-old boy simultaneously becoming closer to and more distant from his dissolute but engaging father. *Father's Last Escape*, by Polish writer Bruno Schultz, is a spare and difficult metaphoric rendering of the death of his father.

Most of these stories remain etched in the imagination long after the reader finishes them. Each gathers us into a private and unique context of emotion and sympathy, and can be quite disorienting jumping quickly from one story to another.

I can imagine other anthologies on similar topics, but none would be as distinctive, eclectic or far-reaching as Manguel's. Certainly none would be as richly researched. In this age, it is a pleasure to see that Manguel is not been encumbered by the facile strictions of voice appropriation. Both female and male writers are gathered liberally within each collection.

Manguel's introductions to each book and to the individual stories are also compact nests of insight, information and compassion. He quotes Louise Erdrich in the brief introduction to her story, *A Wedge of Sho*, which typifies the tone of many of the stories collected here: "This is our human problem, one common to all parents, sons and daughters, too how to let go while holding tight how to simultaneously cherish the closeness and intricacy of the bond while at the same time letting out the raveling string, the red yarn that ties our hearts."

Editor and writer Peter O'Brien lives with his wife and daughter in Toronto. He dedicated his book So Speak: Interviews with Contemporary Canadian Writers to his father, Lee O'Brien, in absentia.