

MEMOIR OF THE BOOKIE'S SON

By Sidney Offit

(St. Martin's Press: \$18.95; 165 pp.)

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Reviewed by Robert Ward

The central and most imponderable mystery of most men's lives is this: Who is my father? The second part of the equation is: And does he love me? Many of my own male friends have spent a lifetime trying to figure out just who that stranger is or was. For there is something strange and unknowable about fathers. They are never around enough, they don't share the loving and intimate language of children and mothers. They are, even the best of them, awkward and confused in the face of their love for their sons. A man may have to rebel against stifling mother love but at least he knows it truly exists. A father does his mysterious work, appears like a ghost at supper time, or briefly on weekends. He is sometimes God like, and about as approachable.

And so, as boys we yearn to know

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our fathers, to please them. Then later, when we are men, we must work backward in time, like detectives of the heart, picking up clues from a now all but forgotten past. Clues to a mystery which many of us pray will have a happy ending.

This need to understand and to be reassured that, in spite of everything, our fathers loved us, has given us some brilliant and unforgettable books. Geoffrey Wolf's "The Duke of Deception" and sections of Frederick Exley's great memoir, "A Fan's Notes," come to mind. Now Sidney Offit has written a stirring and beautiful memoir of his own father, Buckley Offit, a gambler and bookie from Baltimore in the '30s, '40s and '50s. Though this biographical excursion is only 165 pages long, it packs an emotional wallop twice as large as many bigger, hotter, sexier and more well-publicized books. Indeed, while reading it, I thought to myself, "This is what really good popular writing used to be about." That is—understated, subtle, not overtly sentimental. In "Bookie," real sentiment and real feelings come pouring off the page. Compare this heartfelt little book to such trash as "The Bridges of Madison County" and you see the difference.

The story of Buckley Offit is quiet, unobstructive. It goes like this: Buckley Offit was a bookie. His son, Sidney, loved him and did not understand what his father did. Gradually, his son begins to see that the tough-talking, taciturn hard-ass is his father is in actuality a criminal, which matters not as much as anyone used to reading thrillers would suspect it might. That is the strength of this remarkable little memoir: It upsets our preconceived ideas on the subject. Any good trashy novel, or

mini-series about the same subject would be guaranteed to include a "comeuppance scene." You could write it in five minutes: "You're a crook, dad, a bookie, that's all you've ever been. You've let down ma and you've let me down and" . . . blah blah blah. There is no such scene in "Memoir of a Bookie's Son," because the book is too intelligent, and too fine for that. Young Sidney finds out his father is a bookie when he hears some other boys talking about it at camp. One of them says: "Buckley Offit is the biggest bookmaker in Maryland, maybe the entire United States of America. I mean, we're talking Daddy Warbucks, Jay Gatsby and Arnold Rothstein rolled into one." Up to this point in the story, Sidney is only vaguely aware of what it is his father does, even though he has found his father's money in a shoe box, and even though he's been told by his parents that if anyone asks, his father is in the "shirt business." He still doesn't really understand that his father is a criminal until that moment at camp. His reaction is beautifully handled . . . no cornball melodrama, no reproaches and not a lot of Hollywood chest puffing about "my dad the gangsta!" either. Offit's tone is dead on: This is just one fact of many about the man who was his father.

What comes across in the book is the deep, real feeling Offit has for his father and in less measure (because more mysterious) the affection his father felt for him. When his father loses an eye in a car wreck, he's as tough and stoical about it as when he loses a bundle at the track. When he's arrested during the bust of a gambler in Baltimore County, he goes right to work fixing the police and leaning on one of the gambler's boys to say he wasn't involved. Little by little Sidney Offit understands that his father is a very tough cookie, and

he sees the price his mother, Lily, has to pay for being married to a criminal. No one is allowed to visit the house, and his mother spends her life defending Buckley's chosen profession. To put this in the current lexicon, one might say that Lily is in denial about what her husband does, but Offit doesn't trivialize the story by thinking of his father as an addict and his mother as some kind of enabler. Lily Offit loves her husband until the day she dies, and Sidney Offit feels that his mother didn't think the compromises she had to make too high a price to pay.

Indeed, the entire book has a lovely, old-fashioned quality. Old fashioned in the way Hemingway is old fashioned. Sidney Offit tells you who his father was, offers you fascinating snapshots into his and his parents lives, then turns out the light. This approach works; there's not a dull passage in the book. But a part of me couldn't help thinking that it works a little too well. I could have read a lot more about Buckley and I would have liked to know more about what the grown-up Sidney really feels about his father. Sometimes just showing pictures isn't quite enough, and though the tone is quietly celebratory of his dad's life, I wonder if the grown-up, 60ish author doesn't hold a few more grudges, have a few more undigested raw feelings toward such a father.

But that's another story. Meanwhile, "Memoir of a Bookie's Son" is that rare thing, a short, modest, and affecting memoir that moved me deeply—one that I won't soon forget. ■

Robert Ward's novel "The Cactus Garden" will be published by Pocket Books in October. At the same time his first novel, "Shedding Skin," will be reissued by Washington Square Press.