

On the Town

Sins of the father

Poet Lucia May comes to understand if not forgive the terror that was her dad

*I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.*

— W.H. Auden, "September 1, 1939"

BY JUDY WOODWARD

Lucian Piaskowiak was a terrible father. So terrible that he abused his stepdaughter and may have been complicit in driving his stepson to suicide. So terrible that he beat his 9-year-old daughter and told her that if one day he killed her, the death would be her fault for "having provoked him." So terrible that his daughter moved out of her father's house when she was just 15 and broke off all contact with him for almost three decades.

That daughter today is Mendota Heights resident Lucia May. Years after leaving her parents' home, and by then the mother of grown children, May found herself in a family crisis of her own. During that distressing time, she discovered it was only by writing poetry that she could withstand the tide of emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. And that poetry inexorably led her back to her father, the man whose own childhood was one of unrelenting cruelty and whose nickname as a child gave her the title of her first collection of poetry, *Blond Boy* (Evening Street Press, 2014).

Poet Linda Back McKay, who was May's instructor at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, praised May's "journalist's perspective" in writing about the terrible events of her father's life. "May isn't detached," she said, "but she avoids getting caught up in the emotion." McKay called May's work "courageous... clear and compelling."

"This book is not about forgiveness," May said. "Forgiveness comes from a pop cultural point of view.... That kind of forgiveness can be a license or a shortcut. My father might have said, 'God forgives me. Who are you not to forgive me when I beat the hell out of you?'"

Instead, May put her faith in understanding. "To contextualize is to

understand," she said. "Compassion can come from context. Every story of abuse has its back story," as May learned when in 2004 she traveled to her father's homeland.

Lucian Piaskowiak's back story was a grim one. Born on a farm in Poland, he was 12 when Nazi Germany invaded in 1939. Although the Nazis reserved a special venom for the Jews, Polish Catholic schoolboys like Lucian were vulnerable to harsh treatment as well. Starved, beaten and forced into a slave labor camp by the Germans, Lucian soon learned the lessons he later passed on on his own child: Violence is most terrible when it is unpredictable, and nothing is as bad as being tortured for someone else's amusement.

In her poem "Luck Runs in My Family," May describes how a "certain Nazi liked to stand my father against a wall, walk back and fire his pistol as close as possible to my father's head...for sport." Mordantly, May writes that Lucian survived and "live(d) to call it luck."

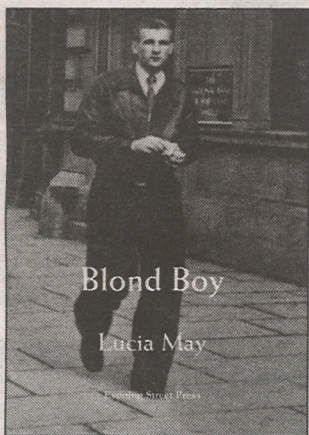
Luck, however, was in short supply after Lucian immigrated to the United States in 1951, married a Polish-American woman with two young children, and started a family of his own in the Cleveland suburb of Parma. May was born in 1959.

"The whole notion of what was normal in my family was skewed," May recalled. "Lucian could no more be a suburban American father than he could be the man in the moon." Instead, he became a failed hairdresser and a religious fanatic whose violent temper was exceeded only by his incongruous sense of self-righteousness.

Family life became a bitter pageant of beatings and irrational rages. Periods of quiet were punctuated by "prayers more whiny than pious," May writes, and the cassette tapes of such homegrown Ohio evangelists as Kathryn Kuhlmann

"provided the soundtrack of my middle childhood."

May eventually took revenge on her father by demagnetizing his cassettes. After he left for church one day, she writes, "I took a five-pound magnet and glided it in a slow benediction over his entire sermon



Lucia May, author of *Blond Boy*, a family memoir in poems. PHOTO BY BRAD STAUFFER

collection." After a few days of silence, she said, "he began to buy new sermon tapes."

For May, the only escape as a child was music. She became a serious student of the violin. "The musicians I met made me," she said. "Music is something bigger than what I come from. My first teacher had been imprisoned at (the concentration camp) Theresienstadt." Another teacher convinced the 15-year-old Lucia that, despite her father's admonitions, "music by non-Christians like Beethoven, Brahms and Bach" was not a tool of Satan, who "often disguises himself in great beauty to trick us into not glorifying God."

These teachers and other role models taught May that she was not doomed by the "begrudging, judgmental bitterness" of her father. She became a professional violinist and even married the president of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. She now teaches violin both in her private home studio and through the Bravo! program for advanced string students at the University of Minnesota.

May likens music instruction to writing poetry. "Teaching violin is a playground for

metaphor," she said. "Teaching is a time zone in itself. For me, teaching music is closer to poetic expression than performance because words are the vehicle."

These days, May's greatest joy comes from the Saturday chamber music sessions that she and her husband, Bruce Coppock, hold for her students. "Nothing gives Bruce more pleasure than playing the cello again with the students," she said.

As for her father, Lucian is still alive, confined by Alzheimer's disease to a nursing home in Ohio. May, the daughter who shut him out of her life for 28 years, is now his legal guardian.

"I think I've gone as far as I can with my father," she said. "I thought if I understood him I would learn to love him. But I found that there were very good reasons not to feel close to him. I feel compassion for him. This is what closure looks like."

May will read from *Blond Boy* in a free program at 7 p.m. Wednesday, November 12, at Magers and Quinn Booksellers, 3038 Hennepin Ave. S. in Minneapolis. For information, call 612-822-4611.

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