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Great Expectation: A Father's Diary

DAN ROCHE

SIGHTLINE BOOKS. UNIVERSITY OF IOWA PRESS, 2008. 158 PAGES, CLOTH, \$24.95.

“ omphaloskepsis,” or navel-gazing, is a charge critics often level at nonfiction writers, and Dan Roche is clearly guilty in *Great Expectation: A Father's Diary*. Yet it is not Roche's own navel, but his pregnant wife Maura's expanding belly that captures his focus in this very satisfying book, so one hopes haters will give him a pass.

Roche's first book, *Love's Labors: A Story of Marriage and Divorce* (Riverhead, 1999), documented the failure of an earlier marriage. Employing the diary form in this latest effort, Roche records in rich detail and with crucial candor the arrival into his second marriage of a second child, a son this time. (The Roche-Bradys, English professors both, are already parents to five-year-old pixie daughter Maeve, a genuine scene stealer.) It would seem that one of the major challenges in a form so regular as the diary, particularly when used to tell a story the ending to which we think we know, would be to create narrative suspense, to keep readers turning pages. But Roche manages ably, noting every unexpected obstacle thrown up along the way, but also defamiliarizing the familiar, examining critically the anxieties and sentimentalities that attend contemporary fatherhood.

The persona in literary nonfiction must be good company, of course, lest we put the book down (life has no “plot” after all), and Roche's company is quite good—he is witty, curious, warm, but also skeptical, a prime noticer of coincidence and insight in external phenomena and of subtle changes in internal, emotional weather. Taking to heart Scott Sanders's notion of the essay as an amateur's raid on a world of specialists, Roche combines bits of medical science, Celtic mythology, and quotidian anecdote, among many

other things, to explore and tell the story of this pregnancy. When he tells another father at the playground that he and Maura are expecting a second child, the man has a good laugh. “You’re going from zone to man-to-man,” he tells Roche (who has the good sense to write it down).

Roche also assumes the classic outsider pose. Phillip Lopate identifies among essayists a propensity for idling—“loafing attentively,” Edward Hoagland calls it—and Roche points out how marginal he sometimes feels to this story. “Pregnancy is never about the father,” he writes. “I’d forgotten the isolation pregnancy brings.” All the better to tell the story: the book is, at least on one level, a meditation on waiting. Roche writes that he has always considered this ability “to take things as they come” both a strength and a weakness, “a quality that would make [him] a lousy doctor, an inept politician.” But it seems a clear strength for him as a writer. He explores trepidations about becoming a father again at his age (he turns 45 in the course of his wife’s pregnancy, she turns 40), and worries about a host of other possibilities: that this new baby will be a boy (perhaps like the boys he disliked so much in the locker rooms of his youth), that there will be medical complications (an early ultrasound reveals what might be a defect in the fetal heart), that the needs of the new baby may supplant young Maeve’s, that Maura’s OB may not share Roche’s reproductive politics. His willingness to step away from his life, to cultivate self-doubt, allows Roche to see experience clearly, and his willingness to eschew politeness allows him to articulate its insights with uncommon clarity.

Some of the more intriguing aspects of *Great Expectation* are the unexpected events, like the death, midway through the pregnancy, of Maura’s apparently healthy mother while on a postretirement cruise to Europe. An outsider again, this time to grief, Roche records how loss tempers his wife’s joy about the pregnancy. But he also takes the measure of his own grief at the passing of a woman who had become a dear friend and on whom the couple was counting for backup after the new baby’s arrival, wondering what portion of the loss he can rightly claim, if any.

The slow death of his mother-in-law’s dog, Calvin, whom Dan and Maura had agreed to care for while his owner cruised Norwegian fjords, provides a touching counterpoint to the baby’s arrival. Roche carefully sets several other narrative drives in motion toward the end of the narrative, for the sake of complexity and of verisimilitude—expectant families, after all, never have only the new baby to think about. Perhaps because I, too, am a

snowbound, upstate-New York father of two boys, the older one a budding hockey player, my favorite is the backyard ice rink. The baby is due during the heart of the cold Syracuse winter, and as that season comes on, Roche, an erstwhile engineering student with an itch to turn his hand to something, begins to reassemble in his backyard the ice rink he'd put in the year before, determined this year to get it right. It serves as wonderful metaphor. There are complications—an uneven yard, unseasonably warm temperatures—and even with the dog Calvin on his way out and the new addition soon to make his appearance, Roche checks his ice daily for cracks.

Mother and baby are fine in the end, I am happy to report; father and sister, too—even backyard ice rink (though poor Calvin is a casualty, as are an alarming number of other family pets—cats, birds, you name it). I was surprised by my own reaction to the baby's ultimate arrival, moved in spite of myself—a testament to Roche's skill in arranging the narrative. He keeps the baby's sex a mystery for half of the book, withholding the name (I won't spoil this, but will say it seems to suit him) until the very end, so that there remains a bit of drama though we have known the outcome all along.

Or have we? *Great Expectation* reminds, in a way that I think only nonfiction can, owing to its claims to verity, that such happy outcomes are not guaranteed, despite our planning and intelligence, the diligence of our observation, and the purity of our hoping. That things working out, even bittersweetly as they do here, is a sort of common miracle.

—Reviewed by Bob Cowser Jr.