Mom takes art shots of naked child. Ring a bell?

Black & White

By Dani Shapiro

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Reviewed by Sarah Coleman

Over the years, novelist Dani Shapiro has developed a specialty in writing about difficult mother-daughter bonds. In her novels "Family History" and "Fugitive Blue," and in her best-selling memoir "Slow Motion," Shapiro has written about daughters' struggles with the voraciously demanding women who birthed them. "I have been afraid of my mother's temper all my life," Shapiro writes of her own mother in "Slow Motion." "The edge in her voice, the way her pupils jiggle almost imperceptibly behind her bifocals — it's all too familiar to me."

In her new novel, "Black & White," Shapiro dials the tension up even higher. Here, the damage done by a mother to her daughter has a tangible, public result. The mother is Ruth Dunne, a driven photographer whose images are "not quite there" until she discovers her perfect subject in her 3-year-old daughter, Clara. Boycotting Clara's older sister Robin in favor of the younger girl, Ruth literally disrupts Clara's childhood, shaking her daughter awake at night so that Clara can pose for her dramatic, eerie photographs.

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Dani Shapiro

These images of Clara — sucking a plastic lizard, hanging by her hands from a rope, dancing naked in a fountain — cause a sensation in the art world. After selling rapidly, they pitch Ruth into the major league of 20th century photographers — but they also have their detractors. Ruth's willing exposure of her daughter sparks a major controversy, during which Ruth's gallery show is vandalized, and a women's group called Clara's Angels springs up to protect Clara's rights.

Fans of photography will recognize a real-life analog here. In the 1990s, when it was first exhibited and published, Sally Mann's "Immediate Family" caused a raging controversy and charges of exploitation. Mann's photographs showed her three children, often naked, cavorting in the yard and streams around her rural Virginia home. Impeccably printed in black-and-white, the images offered a raw vision of childhood that was both achingly beautiful and unsettlingly direct.

In "Black & White," Shapiro makes it clear that she's alluding to Mann. Ruth's portraits of Clara sleeping on a urine-stained sheet, and dangling from a rope, are direct references to famous images by Mann. In the 1990s, the Wall Street Journal published an image of Mann's with the child's chest and genitals blacked out; in the novel, the New York Post does a similar job on a photograph of Clara.

Writing from Clara's point of view, Shapiro explores the negative aftereffects that Ruth's images have on Clara's psyche. When a reporter tries to ambush fourth-grader Clara at school, Clara takes off into Central Park at night in a state of abject fear. "Who can she trust? Disoriented, she just keeps spinning like a top," Shapiro writes. At 18, Clara runs away from home and severs all ties with her mother and New York. She marries a jeweler, moves to a small island off the coast of Maine and lives a reclusive life.

As the novel begins, Clara, now in her 30s, has been called back to New York because her mother is dying. Ostensibly stable, Clara's seething on the inside, ready to fracture at the first mention of her mother's work. "Clara felt the story of her life gathering inside her, brewing like a storm," Shapiro writes. "First she would feel it somewhere deep in her stomach, a torrent of words all knotted up; then it would slowly make its way up her throat and finally into her mouth. Bitter, explosive."

Shapiro isn't the first writer to deal with this subject matter. In Kathryn Harrison's 1993 novel "Exposure," the daughter of a famous photographer, whose reputation was built on the creepy, voyeuristic naked photos he took of her, grapples with this legacy as the Museum of Modern Art prepares a major retrospective of his work. Other novels — notably Paul Theroux's 1978 "Picture Palace" — have presented famous photographers as difficult, egocentric characters with no regard for the shattered souls they leave in their wake.

But even given the thorny ethics here, it's unclear why Shapiro is gunning for Mann. Fifteen years on, her "Immediate Family" exudes an almost nostalgic air of sincerity and simplicity in a culture that has since seen JonBenet Ramsey, "Girls Gone Wild" and Bratz dolls. That's not to say the images are innocent; they're not. They depict complicated moments of children's lives that are unsettling in their intimacy, but the tone is quiet and wondrous, not fetishistic.

What are the consequences for a child whose body is pressed into service for a parent's art? It's an interesting question, and it's entirely plausible that — as Harrison and Shapiro suggest — the child could have deep, permanent emotional scars. But Shapiro's presentation of Ruth's image-making as child abuse seems overblown. At her best, Shapiro is a subtle writer whose language powerfully conveys the highs and lows of human interaction. But in this novel, there are times when she seems to favor drama over nuance. Black-and-white takes precedence over shades of gray.

For those gray tones, look to Mann and her daughters. Defending herself in the online magazine Nerve.com, Mann wrote, "Any parent knows that you can't force a child to make art; they have to cooperate, they have to want to be part of the process." Mann's daughter Jessie, now an artist herself, said in a 2001 interview in Aperture magazine, "[Being photographed] gave us a sense of beauty." One wonders what Jessie Mann would make of the idea that she was symbolically raped by her mother's camera. ■

Sarah Coleman writes on photography for Photo District News and View Camera.