

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

From Saturday's Books section

When the child becomes the parent ★★★★★

Heather Menzies' life was turned upside-down when her mother started suffering the diminishment of Alzheimer's disease. But she rose to the challenge

Reviewed by Paula Todd

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It starts simply enough – a forgotten word, a lost name, a misremembered date. Then, as the sticky fingers of Alzheimer's squeeze off more critical brain function, the backward journey through life picks up speed, shedding memory, a sense of direction, the ability to converse, bake a pie, recognize a child's face.

This tale of time lost has become all too familiar, but what if the person disappearing is a domineering, argumentative mother who overwhelmed her children's emotional growth and made them rivals for her love? As her massive personality begins to recede, is there time to make sense of the matriarchal giant, even to make peace with what she has done – and failed to do?

- **Enter Mourning: A Memoir on Death, Dementia, and Coming Home**, by Heather Menzies, Key Porter, 240 pages, \$21.95

Fortunately, daughter Heather Menzies has sufficient strength and insight to push past denial and confront the painful tangle of emotions aging parents evoke in their frightened offspring. “Mum being in charge was all we knew, even when it was clear she no longer was.” That's what makes this such a fascinating and valuable book: It is as much a quest for a more authentic life as it is a diary of a mother's death, a heroic mining of family relationships and an often-eviscerating excavation of Menzies's own motivations in the role she “played” as the youngest of four kids, who longed for the love of their demanding mother.

“Growing up with this ... tended to polarize us as children: not just competing against each other for Mum's approval and attention but, later, lining up as either against her for all the ways she had denied us, controlled us, disciplined and judged us or, in the other camp, fully on her side, loyal no matter what.”

Not surprisingly, when that omnipresent mother begins to sink into the abyss of her 80s, each of her kids plucks a different weapon from his or her quivers to cope. At first, Heather wears the mask of “dutiful daughter,” while her oldest brother said he welcomed any sign of the disease “because it weakened my enemy.” But somewhere on the way to her parent's grave, Menzies decides that she will not retreat as her mother passes but join her hurtling through the looking glass, her companion on the trip down the primordial tunnel.

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“I feel as though I'm serving almost as a midwife here, soothing Mum's journey toward death and acting as her trusted navigator. And in making that journey so close to her skin, so close to death, I am being born into a new sense of myself and my own aliveness: on the other side of the fear of death, on the other side of my insecurity, of my fear of living fully, my horror at the nursing-home look.”

This journey is made more poignant – but also more possible – as her parent loses language, the faculty that has defined her daughter's life and literary success. “As Alzheimer's hacked away language as a workable bridge between Mum and me, this more primal stuff, the tactile give and take of love's physical connections, was there to hold us both as I slumped and dozed on her shoulder ...”

When the linguistic relationship disappears, she slips with her mother into pre-speech, connecting through flesh and breath and the intimacy of shared silences. The daughter, who could never get enough of her mother's time or touch, was taking it now. And suddenly, welling up from the depths of dementia, come the words her mother should have uttered when lucid: I love you.

“We stood there hugging each other hard – for the first time in our lives as far as I can remember. She'd never said ‘I love you’ to me before; nor really had I to her.” In her 50s, the daughter becomes child, finally. “Part of me wanted to stay where I was, snuggled in the clasp of Mum's hand in mine, just the two of us in our own little bubble of time.” But looming death makes parents of their children, who must face disease, hospitals, the technicalities of living wills and powers of attorney, of making life and death decisions while scrutinizing motives (will this make it easier for her, or for me?).

Menzies knew little of this world, and, as a crack journalist/researcher, made it her mission to acquire the medical and legal tools she needed to help make end-of-life decisions. Here, too, we are treated to another delicious irony, because while Menzies struggled to learn the basics, she also battled competitively, if silently, with her three expert elder siblings: a doctor, a lawyer and a business administrator. This time, though, big-little Heather puts up her dukes and does the dance of sibling rivalry with a new confidence, built on her mother's recent professions of love and appreciation.

It is this constant psychological tension track, along with Menzies's exploration of self and language, that elevates *Enter Mourning* from a lament to a magnificently memorable memoir – of both mother and daughter.

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