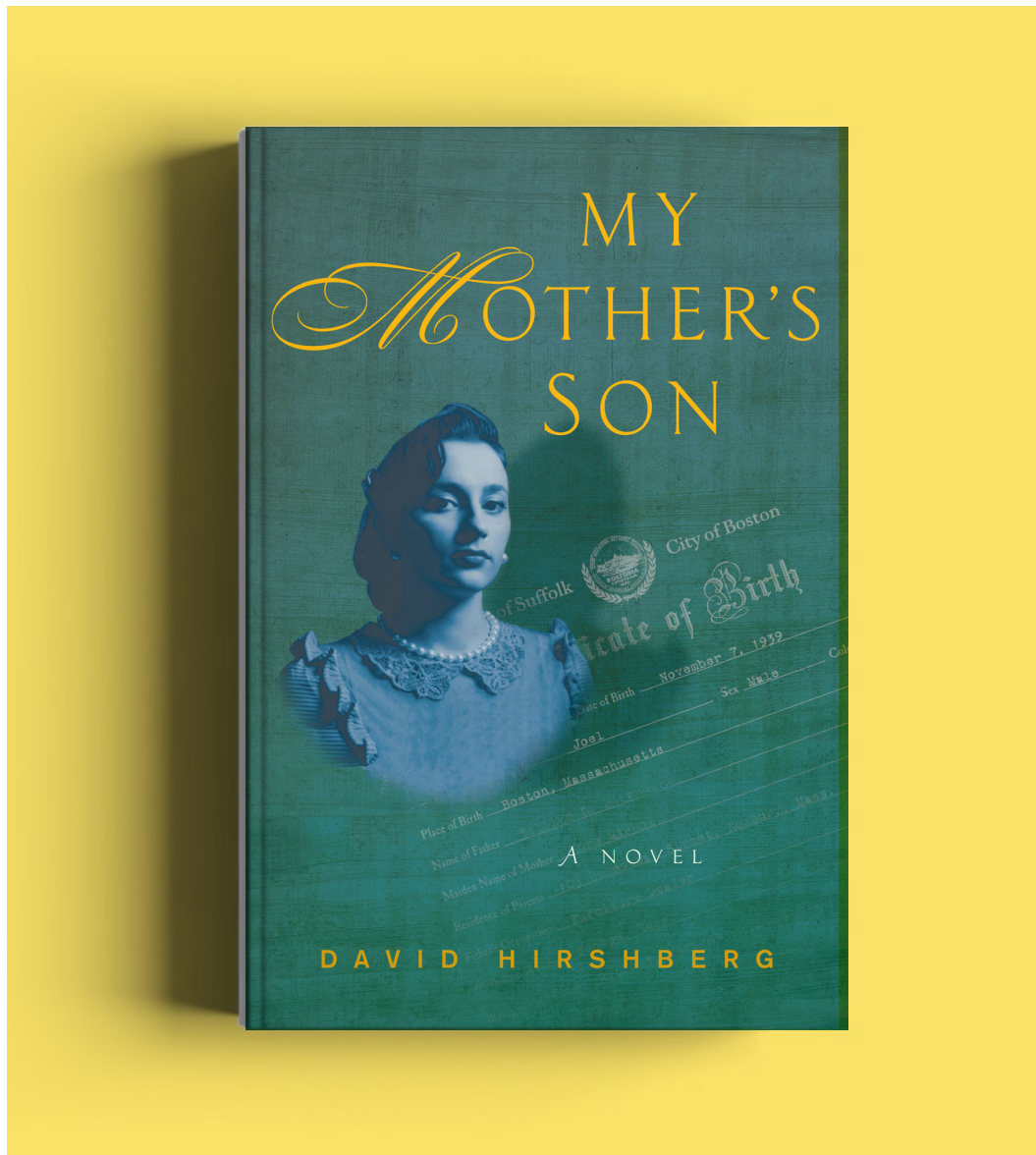


JBC Book Clubs Discussion Guide

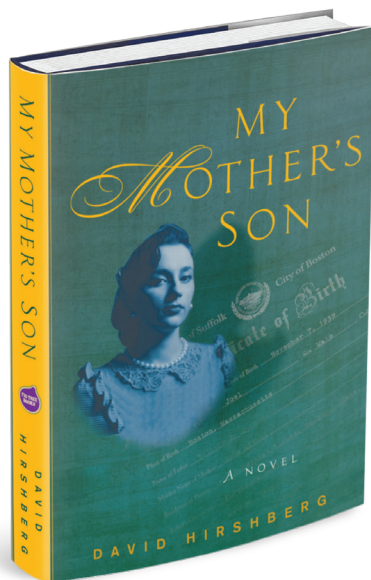
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Awards and Key Reviews



- **Gold Medal, Regional Fiction**, 2018 Independent Publisher Book Awards
- **Winner, Best Regional Fiction**, 2018 National Indie Excellence Awards
- **Winner, two New York City Big Book Awards**: Historical Fiction and Debut Fiction
- **Booklist** (the American Library Association), starred review "Readers will find connections here to **Michael Chabon's** *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000) and to Saul Bellow's classic *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953)."
- *Federation Star*, *L'Chayim*, and *The Jewish News* "**This is one beautiful book.** It portrays a pivotal period in U.S. history flavored by the scrambling lives of European immigrants, their acculturated children, and their more fully Americanized grandchildren."
- *Library Journal*, starred review "**This amazing mosaic** of fact and fiction will hold readers in its grip from the first to last page."
- Fresh Fiction "It's easy to see why *My Mother's Son* by David Hirshberg **should become a classic like** *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*..."

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Synopsis

Provided by



My Mother's Son is a literary novel written as the memoir of a radio raconteur that uses the inconceivable events of his family's life and the world in which he lived as a foil to deal with major issues that affect Americans today—disease, war, politics, immigration and business. It has been purposefully set in earlier times so as to provide some distance from the current 'talking heads' climate that instantly categorizes and analyzes events from a narrow, partisan perspective.

The story revolves around an extended Jewish family in Boston that includes a grandfather, his two daughters, their husbands, an uncle and two boys, Joel (the narrator) and Steven, his older brother, who are the sons of the older daughter. From the Prologue:

“Reflected in it is a story with a tale both personal and universal that I'd skirted around gingerly for all these years, a memoir about betrayal, disease, gambling, death, bribery, persecution, kidnapping, war, politics, escape, loyalty, forgery, unconditional love, depression, Marines, theft, girls and a dog. In it you'll find extraordinary revelations about members of my family and the world we lived in, beginning at a time when I caught a glimpse into adulthood, or, as I think about it now, perhaps this was simply the first peep into the rearview mirror of childhood.”

My Mother's Son also lays bare one of childhood's essential mysteries: that often, what parents and other adults say is usually what is most convenient for the adults. The opening line of the book, “When you're a kid, they don't always tell you the truth,” introduces the element of doubt at the outset and this is followed by Joel's observation that sets the foundation upon which the novel is built:

“To a kid, baseball is leather mitts, rubber balls, wooden bats, insignias, pennants, parks and hot dogs. Polio is doctors, hospitals, shots, paralysis, wheelchairs and

lowered voices. War is salutes and medals, pretend battles, make-believe deaths, days off from school, guns and parades. Politics is elections, speeches, buttons, flags, handshakes, history and rallies.

These are the things I knew, for sure, in Boston in 1952. They were truths. They were no less true than my parents wouldn't lie to me, that the mystery of girls would never be revealed to me, that death came only to the old, and that man's best friend was a dog.

By the end of that year, I can tell you that I still believed the thing about the dog.”

There are flashbacks to the early nineteen hundreds that relate to Joel's grandfather's immigrant beginnings and his murdered wife, as well as to his aunt's flight with her future husband from Germany on the day following Kristallnacht, in November 1938; and others from mid-century such as the seemingly innocuous purchase of a souvenir baseball bat that is the proximate cause of a relative's death and another man's murder. Joel's prescience and ability to put disparate things together lead to the discovery of an unimaginable family secret.

The current action is played out in 1952 when the Korean War is raging, there is a major polio epidemic, a young, Catholic Irish congressman is running for the senate against an entrenched WASP and the sports world is being turned upside down with the move of a baseball franchise out of the city. It is post-War America, on the cusp of dramatic changes that Joel muses about near the end of the book in 2012:

“Our American culture has been profoundly changed and one can arguably trace the center of this shift to the time immediately preceding and following 1952, allowing us to view this year as the prism that refracted our societal

attitudes, values and policies towards war, disease, politics, sports, business and immigration.”

While the book’s themes are serious, provide historical insights and give pause to thoughts about present-day America, it is entertainingly written with humor, vivid description and crackling dialog that captures the multi-ethnic (Irish, Italian and Jewish) voices without caricature.

Interview

This interview was conducted by Barbara Solomon Josselson, author of the novel *The Last Dreamer* (Lake Union, 2015)



“Sometimes it’s the lies we grow up with—more than the truths—that define who we are and where we come from. That’s the message of David Hirshberg’s coming-of-age novel, *My Mother’s Son*. Through the eyes of young Joel, we witness essential elements of the

mid-twentieth century: the scourge of polio, the magic of baseball, the repercussions of war, and the development of modern Jewish-American culture. But above all, we come to understand why Joel is his mother’s son—and how that phrase resonates for us all. A deceptively simple, profoundly memorable novel.”

Q: Why did you choose to tell the story as fictional memoir written in the first person?

A: As I’m writing, I try to take on the personality of the protagonist and invent what I might have done or said. The conceit that this is a fictional memoir came after many drafts and freed me up to tell the story as I might have done had I actually been a radio raconteur during this period of time.

Q: Let’s talk more about your protagonist. For most of the book, Joel is a young boy who sees the world through very innocent eyes. While the reader understands the corruption underway, Joel processes events through a much more naïve lens. How did you tap into that innocence, so you could to sustain this youthful point of view through so many chapters?

A: The short answer is that I have three sons, three

Barbara wrote the blurb for the book that appears prior to knowing anything about the author.

grandsons (still hoping for a double x chromosome to appear) and I, too was a young boy once. But kidding aside, when I write for each character, I attempt to be that character, to think and act as I would at that particular point in the character’s life. Then, after I finish a sentence or a paragraph, I sit back and critically review the words to make sure they are true in terms of consistency and authenticity. So the Joel who speaks in situ as a kid has to be a different Joel from the mature raconteur looking back over his life.

The change over time is not just related to Joel; it is most evident in the diary entries of Joel’s Auntie Rose, which begin when she is a little child and end shortly before her death. The reader needs to believe that each entry is written by Rose at that moment in her life. Candidly, this was hard for me ... to get into the head of a woman at so many different stages of her life.

Q: Following up on that, family relationships are so central to the book. In particular, the relationship between the two brothers—both as boys and as middle-aged men—was one of my favorite aspects of the book. Can you talk a little bit about what inspired that relationship?

A: I’ve actually thought about this a lot because I don’t have a brother. Subconsciously, perhaps I was creating a surrogate relationship for one that never existed for me personally. I’ve always admired close same-sex sibling connections and preferred to mine that aspect of life, as opposed to those that describe intra-family wars, which has been done so well by other authors.

Q: Why did you set the novel in 1952 and why is Boston at the epicenter?

A: The idea to set the events of the book primarily in 1952 was a conscious decision based on three considerations: (1)

all of the ingredients that were central to the book could be found in that year; (2) there would be readers who could connect with the era, even if they were quite young at that time; and (3) the world of post-war America was not too remote for most people to see a reflection of what is going on today.

In the summer of 1952 when the Korean War was raging, Bostonians were confronted with a major polio epidemic, a bitter Senate fight between a young Catholic Irish congressman (John F. Kennedy) and an entrenched Protestant (Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr.), the impending move of the Braves franchise out of the city, and many shenanigans involving local politicians and businesspeople that were hidden behind the headlines. It was the perfect cauldron to heat up a story that could resonate with readers today.

To sum it all up, when I looked at all the possibilities for the setting of the novel, the idea of using a story centered in Boston in 1952 made sense, as it was the epicenter of so many of the issues I wanted to explore. By recreating the Boston of this era, I could construct the scaffolding on which the plot is built.

Q: So are you saying that you used these events as surrogates for what we live with today? When you write about the polio epidemic in the era before vaccines, for example, are you really talking about AIDS/HIV before the development of effective treatments?

A: For all of the major themes of the book, I needed to hold up a mirror to the America of the early 21st century. So yes, polio was a distant mirror for AIDS, and the Senate race of 1952 was a precursor of the first Obama campaign. Lodge was the scion of a very old Boston Brahmin family, and John Kennedy was the grandson of Irish-Catholic immigrants. An African-American man running for president on a major ticket in 2008 was as shocking as was the Kennedy race in 1952. In a nutshell, yes, I was trying to find similarities.

Q: The same thing for the Korean War as a model for Iraq and Afghanistan?

A: Precisely. Most people today know little about the Korean War; however, it was eerily similar to our current wars in the Middle East. Despite the fact that the Korean War was only five years after World War II, there was little

impact on the home front. Today when it comes to Iraq and Afghanistan—with the exception of families who have soldiers stationed there—we are totally disconnected. It's an appropriate surrogate.

Q: I wasn't even aware that there was a second baseball team in Boston. Why were the Braves so important for you?

A: This was the first time a baseball franchise moved. When the decision was made to pull up stakes and head out to Milwaukee—the decision was made in 1952 and rumored through the year, but the announcement was made official only in March of 1953—it astonished people. Kids and most adults didn't think then of baseball as a business. It was simply a sport. Now, of course, the headlines are filled with contract disputes, the players' union vs. management issues, luxury taxes, stadium naming rights, etc. Sports today is almost all about business. That started in earnest in 1952.

Q: Was it difficult for you to deal with immigration? It's on everybody's mind today. DACA, Trump with the wall, etc. The immigration issues in the book were different from those of today.

A: Outwardly, for sure they were different. Up until the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924, the U.S. was the destination of millions of immigrants, primarily from Europe, but also from other parts of the world. We needed people to fuel westward expansion—manifest destiny—but let's not forget how hard it was for immigrants to assimilate, and how much fighting there was among the different groups. It may be hard to believe now, but when John Francis Fitzgerald became the mayor of Boston in 1906, this was a jolt to the establishment as well as a signal that immigrants could band together and vote candidates of their own into important jobs. Immigration in the early 20th century through 1952 was about Irish, Italians, and Jews. Ironically, in Boston, they were all coming of age, first fighting against each other and then joining forces to wield power.

Q: Another big issue you tackled was the underbelly of politics and big business: the schemes, bribes, vote stealing and the like. It seems as if this was one of the most important themes of the book, yet it was pretty subtly inserted into the plot. Could you elaborate on this?

A: Although this was the most fun to write about, it was the one area where I had to be most careful. Because of what's going on today, I wanted to make sure that readers could see an analogy to our present time, but I had to do it in such a way that somebody on the left wouldn't say I was on the right, and vice versa. I didn't want the discussion to be draped in the robes of today's political climate.

Q: In the background of the entire novel is the shadow of the Holocaust. I know that this isn't a Holocaust book but the effects of it are central to a critical character, and they lead to a pivotal event. Was it difficult to write about this?

A: In a word, yes. There's no scene that takes place during World War II, so I had to use other means to get at the impact on one central character. It wasn't until I decided to concentrate on Kristallnacht, and then to use the device of a diary written in America, that I was able to unlock the profound consequences that afflict survivors. Quite frankly, it was draining to write about this. It was the one section of the book that I went back to again and again to make revisions.

Q: The book feels extremely autobiographical. How much of your life is in the book and how much is invented/researched?

A: There is not one scene, character, location or situation that's real or that has anything to do with me or anyone I've known. It was all made up out of whole cloth, with the obvious exceptions of certain facts that are true: there was a race for the Senate between Kennedy and Lodge in 1952; the Korean War was in a stalemate in 1952; the Boston Braves did move to Milwaukee in 1953; President Kennedy did make a speech in Berlin in 1963; Kristallnacht did happen in 1938; and so on. It's important to note, however, that the scenes in the book that revolve around these events are pure fiction.

Q: What kinds of research did you do?

A: We're privileged today (some would say spoiled) by the fact that we can access extraordinary amounts of online information about historical events, times, culture, and people. For my research, I used: newspaper articles on political races; photos of politicians, businesspeople, immigrants, Braves' icons, trolleys, racetracks and buildings long gone; letters from soldiers who fought in Korea; articles on places, incidents, and laws in Germany around the time of Kristallnacht; dictionaries of foreign

words; maps of Boston; lists of television shows, books and music that were popular in a particular year; and other documents and archived materials I encountered.

Q: What do you hope will be the impact of your book? What should remain with readers long after they've put the book down?

I want readers to think not only about what I've written, but also about how it relates to what's going on today. If, after finishing my book, readers think they have a more profound understanding of the issues in the headlines today, that would be very satisfying to me ... and hopefully to my readers as well. So much of our current conversations are sound bites—fleeting sentences that are essentially declarations of established thinking. Few people really engage in discourse that enables them to understand other people's positions and actions.

In the long run, I also want people to think about the language that I've used and how it distinguishes literary fiction from other genres.

It's my hope that readers of literary fiction and historical fiction—as well as those who want to understand more about current issues in the news every day, such as immigration, war, communicable disease, and politicians and businesspeople engaging in highly suspect behavior—will get a glimpse of what goes on behind the scenes.

Q: You write under a pseudonym. Why did you choose to do that?

A: Two reasons. First, I wanted to honor my late father-in-law, David Streger and my late maternal grandfather, Bill Hirshberg. These two men had a major impact on my life. Second, I wanted to disassociate my business activities from my writing career. I keep them entirely separate, and I wanted readers to do the same.

Q: Are you working on another novel?

A: Yes, I just finished a second novel. Whereas *My Mother's Son* is centered in Boston in the 1950s, *Jacobo's Rainbow* is set primarily in New Mexico in the 1960s. While they are very different, they both deal with events of the day and Jewish identity.

Q: That's good segue to my last question. It seems to me that one can read this novel on three different levels: (1) as

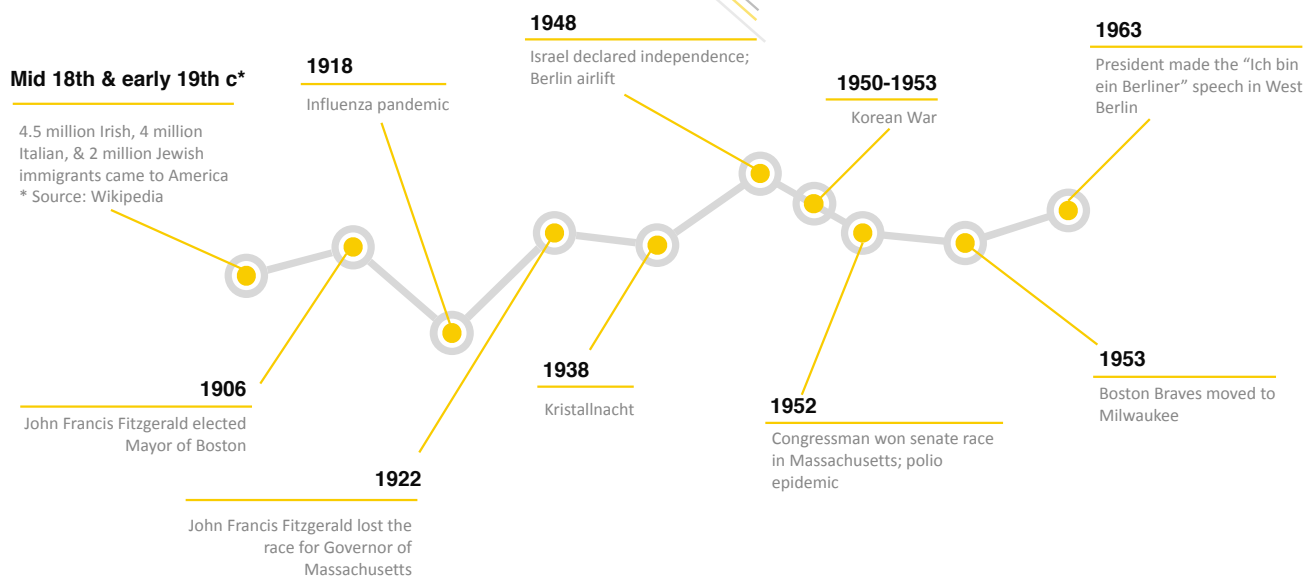
a novel of Jewish identity; (2) as a coming-of-age story; and (3) as a reflection of today. Do I have that right, and if so, was that your intention?

A: Yes and yes! Seriously, most of those who blurbed the book and wrote reviews of it also understood the three dimensions. It was the knitting together of these three strands—a fictional triple helix so to speak—that is at the heart of both this book and my next one. I hope each reader will enjoy all three of the orientations, and will be able to see and feel the complexities of being an American Jew.

Timelines for *My Mother's Son*

Historical and Fictional

Historical Events



Fictitious Events

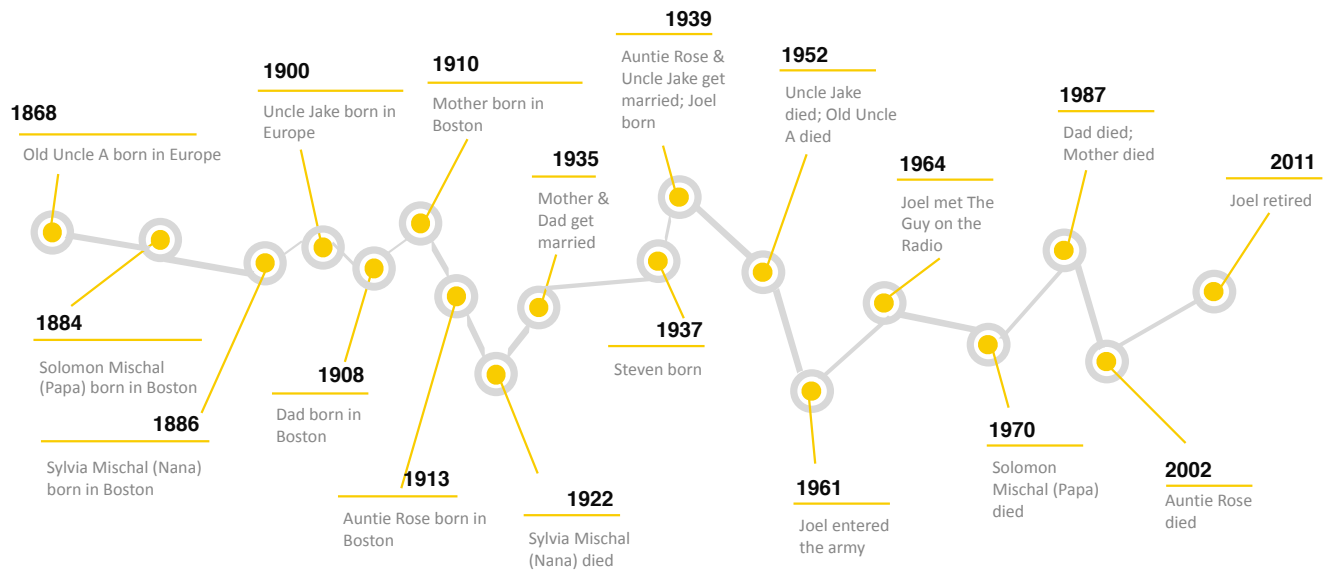


Photo Gallery

with relevant excerpts



“... I glance at the walls of the studio, where they taped up a photo of me from each year, a mélange of shots that arrested a moment of time, but they appear to be a film strip if

you sweep your head from beginning to end, taking in all the pictures, a short reel that exposes customs of dress, grooming habits, and attitudinal stances—the outsides, the two dimensions that others recognized when they saw the me that they thought they knew. I’m all too familiar with these men, some of whom I loved; others, well, let’s just say I’ve taken my leave without rancor but sometimes with embarrassment. No, I don’t deny the veracity of the glossies, the snip-pets that captured me with mustache, clean-shaven, long-haired, crew-cut, with wide lapels (thank God, no Nehru jackets), thin ties, aviator glasses, contacts, tie-dyed T-shirts and cashmere sweaters, often wearing the red-and-blue Braves cap, the Boston Braves that is, which meshes nicely now with my speckled beard that still has a wisp of reddish strands, a trick designed to fool me into thinking that I’m younger than I am.”



“In 1952, Boston was in the throes of a polio epidemic. The spawning of new cases was measured by all the charity events for grown-ups to raise money for the victims, who had to live for years in iron lungs, those coffin-like contraptions, up to seven feet long, in which people lay on their backs and saw through a mirror fastened to the top corner of the machine. Nowadays, of course, you can exist with a small tube inserted into your throat, attached to a portable ventilator, but back then, well, this was your only option. Polio was the first disease Steven and I knew about, although it was difficult in the beginning to understand, because whenever Mother said the word, she lowered her voice to a pitch barely audible, the same pitch she used later on when she’d talk about cancer.”

“To get to Papa’s furniture store, we used to pick up the trolley just as it went underground and got off right before it went under the Charles River and up to Wonderland and Suffolk Downs, where they raced greyhounds and horses.”



marked with occasional streaks of green copper residue etched by years of water having overflowed



“Derby Canurbi was born Archangelo Canurbi, somewhere over there, and although he said he’d fought in

the War, no one was quite sure which side he’d been on. His passport said he’d come to America in 1919 but his accent said more like 1949 and anyway, Murph Feldman got it for him, so all bets were off. His family called him Arky but he was Derby to his friends and enemies alike, and he hung out at the crack of dawn at Suffolk Downs, the third-to-last stop on the Blue Line, which went north to Wonderland.”

“We lived in a row house inside the westernmost border of Boston, poor cousins to the elegant brownstones near Coolidge Corner, a couple of miles west on Beacon Street in Brookline. The ones on our street were sheathed with irregularly shaped red bricks

cluttered gutters, surrounded by mortar that exuded black mold. Once in a blue moon, one of the houses would get hand-scrubbed by Italian immigrants who’d jack up a platform that hung by ropes strung around a vent on the roof, an anxiety-provoking setup that had neighborhood mothers scurrying to the other side of the street, holding their children’s hands tightly, and admonishing them in languages indecipherable to each other never to walk near the buildings when one of the scaffolds was suspended in the air.”

“Honey Fitz is gonna run for guvana,” he said, his brogue as thick as ever. “So’s I need a favor,



I do. He wants to know if youse and the boys”—here he meant Chief Stinkowski, Moses O’Neil, and Murph Feldman—“would help him, ha ha, off the books, coola boola? He asked me special to ask ya, the mayor did, he sends his regards, personal.”

“I tried and tried to tell the truth in the letter to my father. I threw several drafts away, it just didn’t seem right. Don’t ask me how I came up with the idea to concoct the story, for which I have some guilt, I must admit. I tell myself it was the right thing to do. Seeing Little Alfredo’s father and uncle here, I guess it was.”



before one of my friends had the chance to say something that might’ve made the guy suspicious. He gave us bags and lists and told us to make trial runs beforehand, how to make collections, where to put the money,

and what to say or write when someone wouldn’t pay. I sensed that Noodge Mauer was going to ask a question so I shot him a look and gave him a noogie on his shoulder, which distracted him enough to prevent him from continuing.”



“As if on cue, a dozen or so young men entered the room, and I remembered the candidate from the

day we went to Papa’s office. He waved to the crowd as he plunged in; it was like seeing gravity at work, everybody was drawn into his sphere. They swarmed around him so it was hard for him to make progress, but his friends kept wedging him on. I noticed one guy who hung so closely it looked like he was draped on the candidate’s back; he was whispering, constantly, into the candidate’s ear with each new person who came up to shake his hand or to pat him on the back.”

“The stories would start innocently enough, always with a stamp, like the story that the 1898 ten-cent stamp called “Hardships of Emigration” was Nana’s idea. She wrote to her newly elected congressman, John Francis Fitzgerald, in 1895, and Honey Fitz took up her suggestion, for a stamp to honor immigrants, but by the time the Brahmins got done with it, it contained a picture of a Conestoga wagon and people from Scandinavia heading out west from Saint Louis. “Would it be so terrible if they showed a group of refugees coming down the gangplank at East Boston kissing the dock and leaving famine and pogroms behind?” queried Old Uncle A, who then made a sound that can’t properly be written, it’s not exactly phooey and it’s not yech and it has a bit of extra saliva from the back of the throat in it so you know if you’ve heard it before and you know what it means even if it isn’t in the dictionary and no one can spell it.”



“We biked over to the Herald Traveler building to get the forms to be a paperboy from the guy who sat in the paperboy office out back. The guy told us that the only openings were for routes in Brookline and Newton. I quickly said that was okay, we’d take them,



“On Wednesday, November 9, violence erupted throughout the country. Egged on by the men in brown uniforms, tobacco shop owners, ticket collectors, waiters, bakers, clerks, foundry workers, office managers, deckhands, ordinary people, took to the streets, raced through town squares, marched through cities, looking for Jews and Jewish businesses. ‘It will pass,’ the Jews said to each other in their homes, which they did not leave that day. ‘When the people come to their senses, they will be ashamed of themselves,’ they added. Gasoline bombs exploded in stores where once gentile had worked for Jew. Synagogues were burned, men were rounded up and stabbed, women were spat upon and kicked, children were beaten with sticks and shoes.”

“There were more than four hundred thousand people out in front of the Schöneberg Rathaus, West Berlin’s city hall, at the Rudolph Wilde Platz across from Checkpoint Charlie. It was a beautiful day. The crowd was in a festive mood. You have to remember

that Berliners were cut off from West Germany, from the world, when the Russians put up the wall. There were times they suspected they’d be traded in some cold war card game and would end up behind the Iron Curtain. Having the president of the United States come to West Berlin was an affirmation of their worth to the West. I looked at the president’s trip as a reflection of the American ethos to forgive and forget. You know, as an abstraction, I’ll sign up for that, but in the real world, forgiving isn’t so much an act of charity as it is naïveté and forgetting is an insult to the victims.”



Discussion Questions

Questions were provided by author

1. How does the opening line – “When you’re a kid, they don’t always tell you the truth” – manifest itself throughout the book?

2. Do you relate to the opening line and if so, how?

3. The author drops tells like breadcrumbs to presage later events. The very first one is the word “smirk” on page 2. Can you identify others?

4. While the origins of Joel and Steven’s names are noted, why are their parents’ names never mentioned?

5. Is it a coincidence that four men are named Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Solomon or are they simply representative of Jewish American names from the late 19th and early 20th centuries?

6. In 1952, Joel and Steven biked all over Boston. What does that say to you about the cultural changes that have taken place in the last 60 years?

7. Does the use of foreign words, such as Schickelsfrage, enhance or impede your reading?

8. Was the dilemma that Dr. Daniel Burgas faced in Korea similar to what Dr. Jacob Goldblum faced in Germany? What does that say about the choices we face?

9. Who is the most important character in the book and why do you feel this way?

10. Since Joel is a radio raconteur, is it possible that he made up all the stories? If so, why would he have done this?

11. What does the author mean when he writes, “...solitude in moderation can be an ally if you get along famously with your conscience”?

12. Do you agree that, “There’s no difference whether you

hear something from the point of view of first person actual or third person fictional if it interests you, moves you, or gets you to think about things from another perspective”?

13. There are three distinct generations in the book, examples of which include: Papa and his pals; the boys’ parents and aunt and uncle; and the boys’ friends. Are the generational distinctions presented in the book a thing of the past or do they exist today, and if so, how have they changed?

14. What is your reaction to what the author says about the events of 1952: that they were “...the prism that refracted our societal attitudes, values, and policies toward war, disease, politics, sports, business, and immigration”?

15. Does setting the book in an earlier time allow you to have a conversation about current headlines without wrapping them in today’s ‘talking heads’ political climate?

16. One can read this novel on three different levels: (1) As a novel of Jewish identity; (2) As a story—you could say a Bildungsroman; and (3) As a mirror for what’s going on today. Discuss how each of these resonated with you.

Meet David Hirshberg



Credit: Alison Sheehy

David Hirshberg—a pseudonym—has written the award-winning debut novel *My Mother's Son*. He adopted the first name of his father-in-law and the last name of his maternal grandfather, as a tribute to their impact on his life.

He is an active member of Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, New York where he is a regular at Friday Shabbat services and Saturday morning Torah

Study. Hirshberg is the founder of the Shavua Tov Boys Breakfast Club that discusses books addressing American Judaism, as well as the Sichah, a group of ten Jewish men who discuss important issues that affect the lives of Jews today. At the present time, he is enrolled in a two-year course at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan.

In his business activities, he is a well-known pharmaceutical/biotech executive and entrepreneur. He has been Chief Executive Officer of four firms and Chairman or Executive Chairman of six others, and a member of two other boards. He has a strong track record in successful drug development, specializing primarily in pediatric genetic diseases.

Having stepped down as CEO of his last firm in 2018, he now serves as Special Advisor to CEOs of four biotech companies in the rare disease space.

He received his BA from Dartmouth College and an MBA from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

Review from Jewish Book Council

Reviewed by Renita Last for JBC on May 7, 2018

My Mother's Son is a moving coming-of-age story spiced with dark family secrets, historical references, dirty politics, and poignant immigrants' tales that beautifully evoke life in 1950s Boston.

Now a successful radio raconteur, Joel reminisces about his childhood and the years beyond. "When you're a kid," he laments, "they don't always tell you the truth." This is the account of how the thoughtful, clever, and open narrator finds and unfolds the truths that were woven into the lies, exaggerations, and family lore he's been told.

Joel and his brother Steven grow up in a time of close-knit extended families, playing baseball, rabidly rooting for hometown teams, discovering girls, collecting stamps and an appreciation for history, and watching TV pioneers emerge. It's also a time during which the Korean War raged and neighbors went to fight and die, the polio epidemic was a constant threat, and Holocaust survivors didn't share their experiences—and yet the quirks and differences among relatives, neighbors, and friends were kindly accepted and readily acknowledged.

Joel's family saga emanates from his beloved grandfather. Papa succeeds in his new America by using his wits and resourcefulness to carve out a niche for his family. He becomes involved in Boston politics at a time when Jewish and Italian immigrants worked within the pecking order of the Irish city bosses. Joel and Steven are entrusted with the weekly delivering and receiving of "envelopes" as they bicycle all over town. They're exposed to political intrigue, a baseball scandal, and a colorful group of men of all ethnicities.

The deeply human relationships of the characters are explored in many flashbacks and reveal unexpected, humorous, and touching plot twists. Kristallnacht, the Kennedy machine, kidnappings, depression, and murders

all add layers to the narrative.

This well-crafted, compassionate, and witty debut novel is an emotional and entertaining read. David Hirshberg artfully constructs Joel's life and drops hints and clues as the story sweeps along. The complicated back stories of betrayals, loyalty, and love are engrossingly intertwined with the present.

My Mother's Son explores today's values along with the past as Joel's struggles lead him to realize life is never simple. The many half-truths and clouded secrets he's dealt with over the years finally become clear as Joel realizes he truly is his mother's son. This journey from innocence to acceptance is satisfying, rich, and reflective.

[This review is available on Jewish Book Council's website.](#)

A Gift: Visiting Scribe Essay by David Hirshberg

As part of Jewish Book Council's Visiting Scribe series on The ProsenPeople blog, David Hirshberg wrote the following essay that is available on the Jewish Book Council website and is reprinted in full here.



Moments after my father would beat me, my mother would enter my room as if on cue, and go through the motions of pretending that we were still a family. “Your father doesn’t mean to hurt you,” she’d say, rubbing the top of my shoulders with her open palm, ignoring the beet-hot stain on my rear or the impression of his belt buckle on my legs. By the age of 5, I knew her speech, and I had to restrain myself from getting ahead of her lines, lest my father would reenter and wash my mouth out with soap. He tailored his punishments to my offenses—soap for what he didn’t like to hear, hitting for a rule violation, the belt for resistance. Yes, I was guilty: of not instantly jumping out of my chair to take out the garbage; of saying ‘in a minute’ to a command only to have the French door to my room kicked in with force as he bellowed out the seconds past sixty; of being, well, a kid.

He was all business when handing out corporal punishment. His face would become flushed and taut, his eyes would fix upon the target, and then his arms and legs would whirl like a windmill, powered by the gears of rage. It was only during these episodes that I received his undivided attention. While he was good with physical punishment, he was outstanding in his capability to

crush my spirit with an attack upon my character, my performance or my demeanor. Most of the time this was done at the time of a triumph, in a sports contest, a school event, or an activity such as Scouts.

He had no shame. He’d explode when some hidden fuse would ignite and if it happened to be when a friend was around or another family member was present, it didn’t seem to have an effect on him. I used to dream that mirrors filled every inch of our walls and that when he’d catch a glimpse of himself in one of his rages that he’d stop, abruptly, and approach the mirror with that look of curiosity, doubt and consternation that animals do when they see their own image.

My father loved other people’s children. If we were at a restaurant, he would align his chair in such a way as to be in the direct line of sight of a kid at another table, and he would make faces, hand signals, laugh, and coo, all the while ignoring us completely. By the end of the meal, his chair would be turned completely away from us, as he basked in the compliments and smiles from the other children and their parents. On their way out, they’d invariably stop by our table to tell me how lucky I was to have a father such as this.

One day, the mother of one of my gentile friends asked me a lot of questions, about my situation—that’s what she called it—designed to tease out if my father’s behavior was typical or aberrant with ‘your people’, the delicate phrase she used that had no meaning to me at that time. Perhaps this was meant to be the start of an intervention dance; if it was, it had no second step.

During the summer of my sophomore year at college, my father came up from behind me and kicked me in the calf, yelling about something I couldn’t understand. I turned and clocked him hard on the chin. He tumbled down by

the force of the blow, stunned by my reaction, and in that instant of physical superiority, I seized the moment to lean over him and to tell him, in a surprisingly clear and confident voice, that if he ever, ever, did anything like that to me again, I'd make him pay for it forever.

I saw my father only occasionally in his last forty years.

I never knew the why of it all, and wondered if it were the result of some trauma he faced as the first Jew born in the United States to parents who spoke no English or, perhaps equally likely, that the origin was something related to genetics or a random ordeal that was either real or imagined.

Upon reflection, despite the physical and mental abuse, despite never having heard a kind or loving comment from him, never having had a hug, not even a touch from him, I was, in a strange way, more fortunate than most. Oh, I didn't think so when I was a child and even as a young man, but as an adult who is now 'of a certain age', I have a different perspective. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying I wish other kids had a father like this. Heaven forbid. No. But if you look at it through a prism that breaks down life into its component parts, then I had the opportunity, starting at a very young age, to understand what not to do, how not to behave, how to steel myself against disappointments, how to stop and think about something and make sure that I'd do the opposite of what he'd have done. It's an unusual gift I got, and I've made sure that it'll never be returned.

[This essay is available on Jewish Book Council's website.](#)

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