

THE WRITERS' BEAT

EDITED BY ANNIE DAWID

“The Present Giver, A Memoir” by Bar Scott Review by Annie Dawid

Recently decamped from Woodstock, New York, to Westcliffe, Colorado, at least for part of each year, singer-songwriter Bar Scott has published her first book, *The Present Giver: A Memoir*, which tells the story of her son, Forrest, who died in 2002 at the age of three and a half, from cancer. Scott informs the reader of this fact on the frontispiece of her beautifully designed book, adding, “If this were a novel, I would be reluctant to disclose that the central character dies in the end. But this is not a novel, and Forrest’s death was not the end.”

The Present Giver is a brave book about a mother’s experience of the terribly short life of her only child. It is not maudlin nor mawkish. We learn many of the gritty details of the cancer and treatment that take over Forrest’s life, as well as that of Scott and her husband, Peter. We spend a great deal of time on the pediatric oncology floor of Albany Medical, coming to grips with an extremely rare disease, hepatoblastoma, with its 5% chance of survival. Four children there have the disease, Forrest among them: two will die, two survive. Forrest’s AFP blood test shows 388,000. “A normal AFP – the number you and I walk around with – is between 1 and 9,” writes Scott. “A year later, after three surgeries and fourteen rounds of chemo, his AFP was 12, the closest we ever got, but still way too far away.”

While we experience the

daily life of Forrest and his family during his illness, we also experience the love and light that this child both received and emanated in his short stay among the living. Despite the above technical details, which offer only a brief sample of the lingo and medical ephemera Scott will come to know, *The Present Giver* is a joyous book.

With 8 musical CDs to her credit, the songwriter in Scott understands that joy and sorrow together make for more power than either one separately. She recites to her son a prayer/poem every day since she gave birth, pregnant for the first time at age 39:

I love you, Forrest, more
than the sky
No matter where you go
No matter what you do
I will always love you
Fill the sky with your love so
that you may know
God
and God may know you.

It is said that a child’s death is the hardest to bear, for it goes against the natural order of things. One gives birth, and one assumes the child will one day bury the parent. When the parent buries the child, a re-negotiation with life’s terms is inevitable. Peter says to Scott, “Some people fixate on finding a cure. Other people fixate on blame. You fixated on God.”

Years later, she agrees with

her husband’s assessment. “I thought that if I could understand God then I could keep Forrest alive. There were even times when I thought that Forrest’s cancer was specifically designed so that I would be forced to make sense of God. It was like a test: if I could figure it out, Forrest would live: if I couldn’t, he’d die.”

Scott is valiant in her effort to make sense of God. It is easier to make sense of Forrest. He is funny and bright and generous. During his illness, he accumulates a veritable herd of stuffed animals, all of whom he names. “If a stuffed dog arrived, Forrest would enthusiastically say, ‘Iss one’s named Dog!’ It didn’t matter if there were already six stuffed dogs in the house named Dog – he liked to name his stuffed animals according to their species.”

The marriage does not survive Forrest’s death, as happens in at least half of all marriages where a child dies. And yet, again, the reader will find no bitterness in Scott’s account of these years. They were blessed years. “There’s a lot to be thankful for. I loved being a mom, and, in particular, Forrest’s mom. I liked him a lot and I loved him too. He was gentle and kind. He was also funny and smart and he loved to dance. He felt empathy for others, which is one of the most important qualities a human being can have, I think.”

Read this book. You too will be thankful.

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Annie Dawid’s third volume of fiction, *AND DARKNESS WAS UNDER HIS FEET: STORIES OF A FAMILY*, won the Litchfield Review Award for Short Fiction. It is available on amazon.com. A former professor of English at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon.

Annie is raising her son, Isaiah Max, and two dogs, Freddy and Fannie, in her cabin outside of Westcliffe at 9100 feet in the Wet Mountain Valley.



Bar Scott and Brent Bruser of Westcliffe, www.twincompass.com, host the first Wet Mountain Valley Writers’ Workshop this August, 7-11, with fiction writer Dorothy Allison and memoirist Abigail Thompson. Also teaching are David Mason, Poet Laureate of Colorado, and lyricist/writer Bar Scott.

For more information see www.twincompass.com, phone: 719 783-9740.

“The Great Winter Continues”

by Annie Dawid.

Getting my son to school, the comedy of errors begins. Because the locking mechanism on my Subaru has frozen, the rear door won’t open unless I do it from the outside. I pull the parking brake, step out and find myself spread eagled on a sheath of black ice. Whenever I turn off the radio, the doors lock, and if it’s below zero, the doors lock repeatedly as I drive.

Cabin-bound, all windows shut, I drive to my neighbor’s road, which they allow me to use, since mine is impassible. Due to high snowbanks, the gate will open only downhill, and I have parked too close. With the driver’s door open, Rafe and Fanny have seized the opportunity to exit and sniff the tumbleweed. As we are still a mile from home, I sternly order them back in the car before backing down the road to start over.

Again, I exit the car, this time shutting the door behind me. When

I return to the car, it’s locked. As it’s Monday morning, I’m not likely to find anyone at home. I walk around the car, its engine running, and check the locks. All are shut, windows too, but since the mechanism is so screwy, maybe the lock will give if I tinker a little.

So I do, clicking the driver’s door handle in and out, ESP-ing my mutt to open the lock, but of course, she doesn’t. After 30 seconds vigorously jostling the handle, it comes off in my hand. I feel like Charlie Chaplin in “Modern Times.” What next? I can walk in the single-digit cold toward a neighbor, but there is no guarantee she will be there. Naturally, my cell phone is inside the car, but I wouldn’t get reception anyway. I know what’s needed, but who has a Slim Jim lying around? More importantly, will my dogs get asphyxiated?

The only remedy is to break into my own car. Selecting a big rock, I motion the dogs away from my chosen window, but of course they move toward me. Afraid of hurting them, my first attempt fails. The second time, it works, safety glass coating the dogs and seats. I will pay for this in more ways than one, I

think, as I drive through the gate up to the cabin.

On the deck, my snowshoes are frozen to the wood. My front door won’t open due to the ridge of ice before it. Fortunately, I have a side door out of the wind, which works fine. The cabin is snug and warm, but I can’t tell if I have water because the door to the wellhouse and repaired pump switch is encrusted with three feet of snow, and I haven’t the energy to attempt all that shoveling.

After completing my various tasks, I load my son’s red torpedo sled with boxes of stuff and his basketball, which keeps tumbling into the snow, cartons capsizing immediately. I think wistfully of sled dogs, but mine are out of sight.

Surrounding me is one of the most beautiful places on earth, blanketed with pristine snow beneath an azure blue sky and shining sun, no evidence of humanity anywhere. Ever the comedienne, I continue to tug the sled up the hill, but, in line with my earlier slapstick performance, cartons and ball keep spilling out.

The solution is to push. Ten steps huffing, then rest. At this rate, it will take forever to get up the hill, and

it does.

Bound for town, the freezing wind fills the back seat, forcing the dogs up front. My predicament keeps making me laugh, even after I telephone the first glass place, who says they no longer drive up the mountain to fix windows, or the second place, who says sure, they’ll come up – in two weeks.

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