Book reviews

Stealing fire: memoir of a boyhood in the shadow of atomic espionage by Boria Sax

Frederick Shiels
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Boria Sax, known for his work on the historical culture of animals, among other things, has crafted in *Stealing Fire*, an uncommonly compelling coming of age memoir that defies easy categorization. In middle age, he learned that his father, Saville Sax, had been an atomic courier-spy, working with Manhattan Project scientist and Soviet collaborator Theodore Hall. This book explores the consequences of this espionage, long a secret of his parents, in the life of his family.

I did not want to put the book down. Sax's compact, lucid, unadorned writing results in a work that stands out for at least two reasons. First of all, for me, an international relations and American history scholar, the account offers a new and very personal, perspective on personalities such as Fuchs, the Rosenbergs, McCarthy, Greenglass and Browder, and many others, in an anecdotal, non-linear way. Second, the historical events provide a background to Boria Sax's personal struggle to understand his father and his community, without being aware of the espionage, as he progresses from childhood to adulthood. There is a lot of colorful family history and "normal household craziness", including

personalities that are at least as vivid as the better-known historical figures, for example, his grandmother Bluma, a crusty, old Russian woman of the peasantry, who herself participated in the espionage. The ingenious use of insets, with photographs and historical commentary, enables the author to provide background information without interrupting the narrative flow.

It is difficult to convey the ambiance of the two decades or so, starting near the end of World War II, in which the spying took place and, at the same time, provide intimate, sometimes poignant self-revelation about his own developing personality and relationship to living and dead family members. Boria's relatives had vivid stories of immigration, adjustment, alienation and being caught up, as almost all of us are, in the fads and fashions of their times. Sax's understated, modest narrative style moves from weighty questions to funny, revealing vignettes, punctuated with deadpan humor. He notes that, for all the histrionics that accompanied Cold War intrigue, "[...] our family was a bit like the typical American family of situation comedies such as *Father Knows Best* in which the father was prone to crazy enthusiasms that the mother had to keep in check".

Stealing Fire, with the Promethean reference in its title, is further enlivened by wonderful quotations to open well-named cryptically named chapters, like "Fire and Ice" or "Questions and more Questions". The use of snippets from the Old Testament, or, say, Hesiod, add a certain *gravitas* to his story without

being pretentious. The reader is thus both oddly and powerfully “gifted” with at least three interlaced stories in one. There are musings on the motivations and consequences of having gotten caught up in the bizarre world of atomic espionage. Alongside, this is the domestic dimension, Saville Sax, and his family, where the surveillance and the need for secrecy constantly interferes with everyday needs, while the historical drama lends these needs an inflated importance. Finally, there is account of a boy coming of age, and finally, after a very tempestuous relationship, achieving a sort of posthumous reconciliation with his father. This last story resonates poignantly, because all of us have childhood mysteries, which we spend much of our lives trying to understand.

Two questions are not fully answered in *Stealing Fire*. Why was a “big-league” carrier of atomic secrets never brought to trial, in spite of his surveillance by the FBI?

There are a few tentative answers and speculations, but the question remains open. And what is there in human nature to explain the both the delusions and resilience with which people, like many in this book, confronted the traumas of the Cold War? Perhaps much of the power of the book lies precisely in the unanswerable nature of such puzzles. In any case, our author has achieved one of the most enviable feats for any writer, which is to make the past as vivid as events of today. The book is recommended not only for the scholars of the Cold War period and aficionados of spy literature. It will interest educators, as the memoir is essentially an extended meditation on the relationship between everyday life and the lofty narratives that we call “history”.

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Education Evolving

Review of Kevin, C. (2015), The End of College: Creating the University of Everywhere, Riverhead Books, New York, NY

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Introduction

The Western University, founded in the 1100s by The Church and the State had its purpose to educate students to gain employable skills and to become active participants as citizens. Faculty taught in all “disciplines” and studied the known world. Most “research”, as we know it, was done outside of the

universities. It was not until the mid-seventeenth century that the first proceedings appeared but which involved individuals outside of The Academy.

As knowledge was concentrated in these centers, they were like points of intellectual light on a vast, dark, knowledge plain, drawing learners and scholars. Over time, these institutions suffered “mission creep” adding new subject areas, increased specialization of knowledge and fundamental research leading to new knowledge and practical applications. The land grant universities in the USA in the mid-nineteenth century and the exigencies of two World Wars saw funding directed to these institutions to meet national needs in all areas