



The House on Beartown Road: A Memoir of Learning and Forgetting

Elizabeth Cohen

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In this beautiful book, Elizabeth Cohen gives us a true and moving portrait of the love and courage of a family.

Elizabeth, a member of the “sandwich generation”—people caught in the middle, simultaneously caring for their children and for their aging parents—is the mother of Ava and the daughter of Daddy, and responsible for both. Hers is the story of a woman’s struggle to keep her family whole, to raise her child in a house of laughter and love, and to keep her father from hiding the house keys in his slippers.

In this story full of everyday triumphs, first steps, and elderly confusion, Ava, a baby, finds each new picture, each new word, each new song, something to learn greedily, joyfully. Daddy is a man in his twilight years for whom time moves slowly and lessons are not learned but quietly, frustratingly forgotten. Elizabeth, a suddenly single mother with a career and a mortgage and a hamper of laundry, finds her world spiraling out of control yet full of beauty. Faced with mounting disasters, she chooses to confront life head-on.

Written in wonderful prose and imbued with an unquenchable spirit, *The House on Beartown Road* takes us on a journey through the remarkable landscape that is family.

The House on Beartown Road: A Memoir of Learning and Forgetting Details

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Kathy Nickerson says

I think this is my fourth reading of Beartown Road, and I loved it just as much this time. Such a beautiful journey about love, language, and family in all its challenges and victories. The devastation of Alzheimer's Disease is balanced by the beauty of a toddler discovering life. Such a brave story.

A disclaimer for my faith-based friends: the author does not write from a religious world-view, but many of the people in her life are obviously Christians and she presents them well.

Heather Banghart says

A lesson on adapting or trying to....for we are all humans.

rhonda granquist says

For anyone

Struggling with a family member with Alzheimer's, this is s great read. Actually it's just a good read. The authors father has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. The author, Elizabeth Cohen, her husband and their new baby have bought an old home in the mountains somewhere in New York . They've moved from New Mexico. Just as they had gotten settled Elizabeth's

Mother calls her and tells her she needs to

Come and pick

Up

Her father. He's doing things that aren't normal

And she can't handle him

Elizabeth's husband has left her, daddy moves in . She finds herself in the 'Sandwich generation '

This is funny yet sad

Especially if you've had experience with Alzheimer's

Lori Amato says

A beautiful story of family.

Kristin says

Just loved this beautiful memoir of a year spent as a single mom to a baby and a solo caretaker to a father with Alzheimer's. Most people would have just seen the drudgery of constant caretaking and trying to

manage the basics of life, or been consumed by their bitterness. But this author turned ordinary life into poetry.

Koren says

Loved this memoir of being caught in the 'sandwich generation'. The author has a new baby when her father who has Alzheimer's Disease comes to live with her. Her husband decides he cant handle it and moves out. She is in the country so has to handle all kinds of disasters. I love how her neighbors helped out. She doesn't think she is a strong person but she really is. Through the whole book I wondered why she didn't just put her father in a nursing home but she did the best she could and I'm sure she didn't regret a single thing. I think anyone taking care of elderly parents would love this book. The only thing I didn't like is that she didn't let us know what happened with the husband.

Lola says

The author, Elizabeth (Beth) is in the sandwich generation: a 2 year old daughter & her father, who has Alzheimer's, & lives with her. Her husband left her. I enjoyed this book but I was so glad that I was not in her shoes. Maybe you are.

Alexa says

Chose this title because it was written by a local author, about our area, and it's a memoir, which I really enjoy. Read this in bigger gulps - I could empathize with her journey as a mother and about those cold, cold winters.

Leslie says

The author has her first baby at the age of 40. She works full-time as a newspaper reporter, married to an artist. Everything is fine, but life gets complicated when her 80 year-old father, who has Alzheimer's, comes to live with her. And then her husband runs off with -- get this -- a teenage girl. Now she has to care for a newborn and an Alzheimer's patient all by herself. If she had shot her husband, there wouldn't be a jury in the world who would've convicted her.

Louise says

Very well written!

Diane Yannick says

The ending sentences of this memoir are absolute perfection. Elizabeth tells her whole story with courage, grit and poetry perfectly mixed together. As she cares for an aging parent and a young child, she never looks for sympathy from those around her or her readers. Instead, she intersperses moments of beauty in days that could have been pure drudgery. She accepts what is and isn't with more humility than I could ever have mustered. Plus she has such gorgeous mastery of language; adding just the right amount of careful detail. Guess you can tell that I'm a fan. It just took me almost 15 years since publication to read it. Thanks Kristin for the recommendation.

Although I think this book is out of print, I will try to find enough copies for my bookclub to read next year. Might even duplicate the whole damned book if I need to. (Kidding!)

Sarah says

Sweet memoir of raising a newborn at the same time as caring for a parent with Alzheimer's.

Glenn says

The House On Beartown Road is one of those quiet, unobtrusive books that are easily skipped on a bookstore shelf. Its author, Elizabeth Cohen, does not talk about extreme human experience like the Holocaust, child abuse, or rock 'n roll. Cohen's subject matter is much more modest — her year as a 'sandwich' adult, caught in the middle between simultaneously and singlehandedly caring for a baby daughter and an Alzheimer's father, all while working full-time. We read of peeing and pooping accidents, mac and cheese dinners, and mounting piles of garbage. Dialog is often at the level of a toddler.

This mundaneness is part of the appeal of Cohen's lovely memoir. Her struggle is familiar to millions of families, and thus her truth transcends its moment into a more universal dimension. Regardless, anyone who appreciates fine writing should read Cohen's modest book. She renders her ordeal with a gentle touch and lyrical eye for detail — and remarkable humanity.

Cohen was a 40-year-old journalist in rural New York when her life turned upside-down. Already stretched thin by the birth of her daughter Ava, she took on the responsibility of caring for her aging father after his diagnosis of Alzheimer's, the disease that erodes memory. But nine weeks after Daddy moves into Cohen's house, her husband abandons the marriage. Suddenly alone with a one-year-old and an 80-year-old, and with winter imminent, Cohen is rapidly overwhelmed by her reconfigured family, much like her isolated house becomes imprisoned by the mounting snowdrifts.

"I sometimes feel I hardly exist," she writes. "If I existed, truly, in any important or significant way, then how could my husband have left me?" During one particularly rough patch, an intestinal bug leaves her, Daddy, and Ava all shitting and puking for thirty-five straight hours. But even as her cats lick up Daddy's vomit, Cohen somehow finds perspective. "I am thinking this must be as bad as life can get, but then I see the late-night news — there's a flood in Mozambique."

As Cohen goes through the usual stages of grief, anger, victimhood, and depression, neighbors buttress her

often faltering spirit. They secretly plough her driveway and leave food packages on her porch. By springtime, having survived “[t]he hardest winter of my life” (224), Cohen recognizes that which her neighbors had already told her — she is a strong woman. Her concept of family also evolved. “Now I think of family as the people who stick by you, the ones who are there when you go through things.”

The House On Beartown Road is primarily a memoir of family. Cohen structures it as a story of the human mind in three of its stages — the near vertical learning curve of her baby daughter Ava, her own midlife of the mind that both learned and forgot, and the sieve-like memory of her father in mid-to-late Alzheimer’s. On the same day Ava said Mama for the first time, Daddy asked Cohen for the first time who she was. “Our situation, connected by blood, by memory, and by circumstance, gave rise to the most shining example I have ever seen of the human mind’s course, as it winds through the territory of a life.”

This highly original structure accords an unusual role for language. Cohen contrasts her baby’s emerging vocabulary with the shrinking vocabulary of Daddy. For a while, Ava and Daddy have a meeting of the minds, in that they operate at the same intellectual level. Cohen, feeling excluded, briefly envies their connection. Ava eventually surpasses her grandfather in language ability. But Cohen, with typical eloquence, celebrates the gift that Daddy bequeathed his granddaughter during their few months of wordplay and games. “Instead of thinking about him losing the abilities to speak, to walk, and to negotiate the world, I like to think he has given them to her.”

However, it is the relationship between Cohen and her father that takes center stage — and which most affirms her literary talent. She had always been much closer to him than her emotionally stunted mother, who initially stays at the marital home in New Mexico and remains in denial about her husband’s Alzheimer’s throughout the book. But the disintegration of Daddy’s brain gradually erases his bond with his daughter. He increasingly sees her as a potential lover, and even kisses her as such.

Cohen experiences further loss when Daddy moves into a nearby nursing home, at the insistence of his wife. Mommy had finally joined him in New York, but she quickly tired of living at Cohen’s house. Then comes one of the many small triumphs celebrated in *The House On Beartown Road*. One day Cohen visits her parents at the care facility. Daddy, although in a semistupor, looks up and unexpectedly greets her in the manner she has craved for almost a year. “My daughter,” he said. “Where on earth...?”

Beyond memory loss, Alzheimer’s robs its victims of dignity. The disease reduces Cohen’s father — a retired professor — to sifting through garbage, wearing underwear over his pants, and endless tantrums. Yet Cohen finds beauty amidst the tragedy. She hears poetry in Daddy’s pared vocabulary, as when he calls Ava ‘the one that fills the room with hurricanes’ or refers to toast as ‘singled bread.’ In her eye the strand of drool hanging from Daddy’s lip is a “thread with a dewdrop at the bottom.” Cohen’s lovely imagery will surely touch the heart of anyone who has cared for an aged relative. And her literary voice — blending reflection, painful honesty, and understated humor — is perfectly tuned for her difficult subject matter.

In seeking meaning in ‘normal’ daily life that is universally familiar, Cohen has crafted a *Memoir For The Common Man*. She shows us that even the mundane can be interesting and meaningful, and even beautiful.

The House On Beartown Road also has a socio-political message. Cohen draws attention to the societal impacts of Alzheimer’s, a disease that is predicted to quickly reach epidemic proportions and cripple U.S. health care. “An army of the forgetful is about to march on the whole country, and nobody seems much concerned about it.” The elderly must spend down their savings to get care aid. At-home care is woefully underfunded by government, and prohibitively expensive for the middle-class likes of Cohen.

The book ends with a couple of surprises, one of which might trouble feminist readers. But this is yet another reason to read Cohen's memoir. Beyond exquisite prose and unquenchable spirit, her view of family, while grounded in the familiar, is fresh and insightful.

The House On Beartown Road is a singularly fine literary achievement, especially for a first book. So while everyone else lives vicariously through best-seller memoirs like 'Life' and 'Eat, Pray, Love,' go back to the bookstore and search again for Elizabeth Cohen's quiet masterwork about a life we might all have to live.

Jean says

Author Elizabeth Cohen mines a remarkable trove of material in this wonderful memoir. The juxtaposition of herself at 40, with her newborn child, and her 80 year old Alzheimer's ravished father – all living together in a drafty old house in upstate New York, and freshly abandoned by Cohen's husband – could be tragic, but it's not.

Instead, she brings forward the bittersweet joy of seeing her baby's mind load up with new connections and words as her father sheds his. Also, of the string of Alzheimer's themed books I've recently read, this one best captures an Alzheimer's patient's capricious and sometimes beautiful paraphrasing, misstating, and invention of words and memories. Cohen says she wrote the book determined to keep "a sharp orange flare of Daddy" alive in her own daughter's memories, for Cohen knows experiences from a child's baby and toddlerhood rarely last in memory.

The author gave her daughter, and all who read this book, a fine written account of the grandfather "who built a fire to keep her warm when she was sick; who said 'Hi there, little guy,' every time she entered a room. Who loved her so completely, although he never learned her name." But additionally, this book is about what matters and what Cohen learned from her own growing up, late marriage, parenthood, and art.

Myfanwy says

The Family on Beartown Road is a beautiful, heartbreaking memoir of a staggeringly painful and difficult year in the life of a family. At the center of this family, holding it all together as she herself struggles not to fall apart, is the author, Elizabeth Cohen.

"The book begins with the following series of numbers: 0-40-80. These numbers represent the ages of the three main characters: Cohen's daughter Ava, herself, and her father, who has Alzheimer's disease:

I celebrated all my daughter's firsts. Likewise, I had to mourn all my father's losses. There were numerous coincidences. She said "Mama" on the same day he first asked me who I was. She said "Baby Aba"--her name is Ava--the same week we received our census and my father looked for a long time at the form before asking me his own name."

Throughout the narrative, Cohen exams the steps that brought her to her current situation. In a fit of romantic idealism, Cohen, a journalist, and her husband, an artist, had moved to rural, upstate New York from New York City to raise their daughter. For a while, life was very sweet, indeed.

At the book's outset, however, the shit has hit the fan. Cohen's father has moved in with them and her husband has deserted them. And then winter comes. Cohen, the sole breadwinner, cook, and bottle washer, quickly slips into survival mode, which mostly entails struggling to keep her infant child and aging father from hurting themselves. Dealing with an active toddler or an aging parent on your own is more than enough for one person to handle, but dealing with them both at the same time seems nearly impossible from the outside looking in and yet, over time, Cohen manages. Part of how she manages is by accepting help from neighbors, coworkers, and far-flung friends. Mostly, though, what she does is live in the moment and accept the tender mercies all around her:

"I must admit that, while the management of day-to-day affairs can seem impossible, things are sometimes pleasant. I think of our lives as something akin to the way that people in covered wagons might have felt. Exhausted, scared, but grateful for certain moments. We take pleasure in small things. Daddy likes the smell of coffee brewing. Ava likes to blow bubbles with her saliva while mouthing the word "Mama." I like to sit in the kitchen with the two of them, eating, cleaning up around them, feeling like I have a bit of control. That they are getting nourishment. That I am doing something right."

Even if you have never been a caretaker of the young, the aged, or the infirm, I'm certain this book will resonate for you because at the core, there is a beating heart and a voice--Cohen's own, strong, clear voice--that will remind you not to take for granted how very much you have right now, living in this moment.
