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George Gershwin affair sparks author's memoir

By Patrick McGuire July 21, 2011 7:26PM

THE MEMORY OF ALL THAT

GEORGE GERSHWIN, KAY SWIFT, AND MY FAMILY'S
LEGACIES OF INFIDELITIES

By Katharine Weber

Crown, 288 pages, \$24

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Katharine Weber's memoir, *The Memory of All That: George Gershwin, Kay Swift, and My Family's Legacies of Infidelities*, (Crown \$24.00) is really two books patched into one. First, it is a childhood recollection of a father (Sidney Kaufman) and an attempt to reckon with that father's true past. Second, it is an account of an affair between a famous composer (Gershwin) and the author's grandmother, the first woman ever to write a complete musical for Broadway (Kay Swift). What draws the two narratives together is the author herself. A combination of memories and research informs both stories.

Katherine Weber is an accomplished novelist; she knows well how to manipulate fictional form, as any reading of her 2006 novel *Triangle* will readily illustrate. One may infer that the novelist Weber is drawing these two segments together so that they comment on and reverberate with each other.

The Sidney Kaufman segment is painful. Kaufman was a one-time film producer in Hollywood and a famous film teacher at the New School for Social Research. Weber's childhood is fraught with a fear of this man, who seems to

take sadistic delight in scaring his young daughter. In the book's opening scene, he carries her deeper and deeper into the ocean intentionally misunderstanding her desire to go out of the water. Weber mixes fearful memory with her need to uncover her father's secrets — the files created by the FBI as it followed him in his nefarious "communist" machinations and his plentiful extramarital affairs.

The Kay Swift-George Gershwin segment is a happier narrative. Weber's account is, again, a mixture of memory and research. Quite often the memories are those told to Weber by Ganz, a family nickname for grandma Kay Swift. A happier narrative, yes, but equally strange because Kay Swift was married to James P. Warburg during much of her open affair with Gershwin. They divorced, after 16 years of marriage and three daughters, one of whom is Weber's mother, in 1936. Gershwin died three years later. During their marriage, Warburg, in Weber's account, tried to win back his wife's love by writing musicals and books of middlebrow poetry under the nom-de-plume Paul James. Warburg was the great financier and adviser to FDR — he is also the model for Little Orphan Annie's Daddy Warbucks. Weber reproduces some of her grandfather's poems, which have a mildly racist character; that said, we know Weber's heart lies with Ganz's gentleman caller.

Weber the novelist hasn't quite succeeded in making these two disparate stories adhere to each other. Her presence in the narrative about her father seems necessary, but her presence in the Swift-Gershwin affair, which ended some 15 years before Weber was born, seems intrusive.

Nevertheless, in *The Memory of All That*, Weber's eye for detail and for the right phrase is undiminished. No, no, they can't take that away.

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