

The White Space Between

by Ami Sands Brodoff



A family's story of the Holocaust lies buried in the soil of a graveyard in Prague, in the old neighborhoods of Montreal, in the serenity of a small New Jersey town, and in the memory of Jana – a woman finally asked to bear witness

The Story:

Far from the landscapes of her earlier life, Jana raised her daughter, Willow, on the beautiful scrapbooks she kept of her own childhood in Prague before World War II. But her stories end with the beginning of the Holocaust, and Willow knows little of her mother's life during the war and its aftermath. Jana's memories of this time are so guarded that Willow is uncertain who her father is – the answer left behind in Montréal, the city where Jana first settled after the war.

When both Willow and Jana find themselves back in Montréal, the past can no longer be hidden. New loves are found and lost loves rekindled, and mother and daughter decide to journey to Prague to unearth the stories that can no longer stay buried.

“Brodoff allows art to speak the unspeakable softly. Ultimately, she weaves myth and reality into an honest story where the white spaces are a balm for the woes and wounds of the stories that shape us.” – **The Montreal Review of Books**

“The novel examines the way that we create our identities from the stories we tell about our past, and questions the point at which the truth pushes its way out from the safe haven of denial. The structure of the narrative is well-paced and simmers gradually to a full boil.” – **Quill & Quire**

“*The White Space Between* forms a crystalline menorah in one's mind. With meticulous power, Brodoff evinces from the ash and soil of the Holocaust, the transcendent flame of hope, timelessness, and truth. A deeply moving and memorable novel.”

-**Suhayl Saadi**, author of *Psychoraag*, winner of the PEN Oakland Prize.

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Ami Sands Brodoff is an award-winning novelist and short story writer. She wrote *The White Space Between* in memory of her mother-in-law, who was a Holocaust survivor. Her volume of stories, *Bloodknots*, was short-listed for the Re-Lit Award and an excerpt from her previous novel, *Can You See Me?* was nominated for The Pushcart Prize. She has contributed to *Vogue*, *Self*, *Elle*, *The Globe and Mail*, and Montreal's *The Gazette*. Originally from New York, she now lives in Montreal with her husband and two children. She serves on the executive of the Quebec Writers' Federation and is active in Montreal's literary community.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the title, "*The White Space Between*," serve as a metaphor for the conflicts both Jana, a Holocaust survivor, and her daughter Willow, a marionette-maker and puppeteer, grapple with during the novel?
2. Some novels have a linear, chronological structure, where events are relayed in the order in which they occur. Brodoff chooses a collage, a scrapbook structure for her novel. Discuss why she might have chosen this design to shape her story.
3. *The White Space Between* explores many opposite emotions both mother and daughter struggle with: remembering and forgetting, burying and excavating, using art as a retreat and safe haven from the world, versus using art to reach out to and change the world. What are some of the ways mother and daughter experience these conflicting emotions? Are their feelings different or similar? How so?
4. How does the author utilize Jana's memory books in her story? What are your own feelings about scrapbooks and memory books as a way to record and re-experience family history?
5. Could you tell, from the way this novel unfolds, that the author is a woman, if you did not know? If so, why? How?

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6. *The White Space Between* is full of moments between women, alone with one another. Yet the male characters in the novel are also key to the story and its themes. Can you compare the bonds between the women, between the men, and between the women and the men in *The White Space Between*?
7. What is your emotional reaction and response to Willow as a character? Could you identify with her? How is she different in temperament from her mother, Jana?
8. *The White Space Between* explores single-motherhood and all of its challenges and complexities. Does the novel ultimately present a positive or negative view of single parenthood? What about marriage?
9. What role does memory play in *The White Space Between*? Compare Willow's memories with those of her mother, Jana.
10. How do you interpret the novel's ending? What do you foresee happening to Willow in the future? What about the other key surviving characters?

The Cast of Characters:

Jane Ives aka Jana Ivanova

A Holocaust survivor, originally from Prague, whose parents ran a famous sweetshop, Ivanova's. Her father was a sculptor of powerful heads. Jana was one of five children, the only member of her family who survived the Holocaust. In Auschwitz, she worked as a "Secretary of Death," a typist who processed death certificates for the Nazis in their registry. Knowing how to speak German saved her life. After the war, she settled in Montreal, and some years later, landed a job teaching kindergarten in a small New Jersey town, Kingston, through a connection she had made in Montreal.

Willow Ives

Jana's daughter and only child. Willow is a talented marionette-maker and puppeteer who is offered a guest artist position in Montreal, the city where her mother first settled after the war. Willow knows little of her mother's history, and thus, her own. In fact, she is uncertain who her father is. Her marionettes become a surrogate extended family to replace the one she's never had or known much about.

Sunny Howe

Jana's best friend in Kingston, New Jersey. Both taught young children at Cedarpark Elementary School.

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Noah Issenman

A well-known Montreal playwright, active in the city's Jewish community.

Marie-France

Manager of Usine-C, the avant-garde theatre where Willow is guest artist and teaches a master-class in marionette-making and puppeteering.

Bern Orlofsky

A tailor in Montreal who is an old friend of Jana's.

Chaim Rosenblum

A dynamic leader of Montreal's Jewish community who founded a center for Jewish life called Ha'makom, or "the place" in Hebrew.

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Ten Questions with Author Ami Sands Brodoff:

as told to Open Book Toronto - www.openbooktoronto.com

OB:

Tell us about your book, *The White Space Between*.

ASB:

The White Space Between is the story of a Holocaust survivor and her grown daughter both balancing on the precarious tightrope between remembering and forgetting, a mother-daughter story and love song to Montreal, my adopted home city. The novel centres on Jana Ivanova, a survivor with a generous heart, and her grown daughter Willow, an acclaimed marionette-maker and puppeteer, two complex women who love, but do not really know — or understand — one another. Mother and daughter have built a life on a foundation of secrets. Willow was raised on the beautiful memory books her mother made of her life, jigsaw pieces that don't quite fit into a whole. In fact, Willow is uncertain who her father is. She is a loner and artist, her marionettes forming the family she's missed. When Jana and Willow return to Montreal, the secrets can no longer be hidden, as old loves lost are found and new ones discovered. A journey to Prague proves that the memories and secrets we hide and bury are the very pieces that make us — and our loved ones — who we are.

OB:

How did you research your book?

ASB:

I spoke with Holocaust survivors in my neighborhood, on the street, at my gym, and at my children's schools. I listened to testimonies, read every memoir and history I could get my hands on. I chatted with both survivors and children of survivors to deeply understand the reverberations of the Holocaust in the present. Most importantly, my husband Michael of twenty-one years, shared memories of his beloved mother, Brana and our large extended family, who once thrived in a small, rural town in the foothills of the Carpathian mountains in Czechoslovakia. All but three members of the Hoch family were wiped out — murdered is a more accurate word-- during the Holocaust. The words, the silences, the pieces and the missing pieces, were the foundation for my novel.

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OB:

Did you have a specific readership in mind when you wrote your book?

ASB:

I wrote the deepest, truest, and most compelling story I was capable of creating. My hope is that *The White Space Between* will reach a wide readership. Having said that, I think women will connect deeply with the story, Jewish readers may have a particular interest in the novel, but I want to extend beyond a homogenous group and believe the novel's themes are universal.

OB:

Describe your ideal writing environment.

ASB:

Cozy nightgown, fresh pot of coffee, my "room of one's own" with the windows wide, and the door shut tight.

OB:

What was your first publication?

ASB:

A short story called, "Love Out of Bounds" which was featured in the U.S. journal *Triquarterly*. The story was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and blossomed into my first novel, *Can You See Me?*, which centres on a family grappling with schizophrenia. The story and the novel are both based in part on my own painful experience growing up with a much beloved older brother, who had great intellectual and creative gifts, but developed schizophrenia as a young man. However, the story and novel are a complex mesh of truth and fiction, experience transformed into story.

OB:

What are you reading right now?

ASB:

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Kafka's short stories, *The Emigrants* by W.G. Sebald, *The Cranford Chronicles* by Elizabeth Gaskell and *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte (for the 100th?) time. You could say I love the classics!

OB:

If you had to choose three books as a "Welcome to Canada" gift, what would those books be?

ASB:

Runaway by Alice Munro, especially the extraordinary trilogy of stories, "Chance," "Soon," and "Silence," which possess more power than most novels. *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje and *Survivors* by Chava Rosenfarb.

OB:

What's the best advice you've ever received as a writer?

ASB:

"Go to your (writing) room, no matter how you feel." These wise words were spoken by one of my teachers and mentors, the novelist Paula Fox. "Write about what you're afraid of, what embarrasses you, what you can't stop thinking about, what keeps you up at night."

OB:

Describe the most memorable response you've received from a reader.

ASB:

"Your novel moved me and stayed with me. I couldn't stop thinking about the characters or their story for a long while."

OB:

What is your next project?

ASB:

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A new novel, a brother and sister story. These two are orphans on a quest to find out what really happened to their parents who were travel writers and photographers. The novel is set partly in Malta, where I had a paradisaal writing fellowship, and partly in Puerto Escondido, Mexico. This novel also grapples with the contemporary issue of Libyan migrants flooding the tiny island of Malta, as a young Libyan woman lands on the island, barely alive, and is discovered by the brother hiding in his flat. That's all I'll say for now. Don't want to puncture the magic of creation.

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