Feiffer's funny, fascinating memoir flawed by self-pity

A memoir by the Village Voice cartoonist and the author of "Carnal Knowledge."

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER, Special to the Star Tribune

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For more than half a century, Jules Feiffer has been a humorist of anger and angst. In cartoons in the Village Voice, a play, "Little Murders," and a film, "Carnal Knowledge," he's subjected American society to "comic strip psychotherapy, laugh while you wince, wince as you laugh."

And now, at age 80, he's turned the lens on himself. In "Backing Into Forward," "a memoir of confessional distress," Feiffer whines and wisecracks his way from a neurotic childhood in the Bronx to fame and fortune as an engaged, enraged satirist.

Feiffer is funny. One night, he indicates, he was headed to a post-Academy Award party and got in an elevator with Kirk Douglas, Robert Ryan, Sidney Lumet, Angela Lansbury, Woody Allen and Mia Farrow -- and then adds: "some of these names I'm making up, but it was that kind of elevator." And he can be brutally frank. As a teenager, he recalls, he lacked sexiness, aggressiveness, charm and an opening line. So he exploited his limitations, serving as a counselor to attractive and confused young women who turned to him, on the rebound, when they needed comforting from someone harmless.

Although Feiffer acknowledges that "nothing in print or on stage is more repellent than self-pity," he often seems mean-spirited and, well, self-pitying. His mother, Rhoda Feiffer, dominates "Backing Into Forward" -- and Julie can't stop swinging at her. "She never failed to fail me," he insists. She gave away his dog, never took him to a play, discouraged him from becoming a cartoonist, treated her husband with condescension, was a "micromanager who managed ineptly" and "the slowest walker alive." When she died, he feels compelled to say, he wasn't sorry.

It's a shame. Because in the small amount of space he allocates to "Little Murders" and "Carnal Knowledge," "Backing Into Forward" gets really interesting. With its message that little murders were indigenously American, the play Feiffer points out was a flop in 1967 but became a hit after the assassinations of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert...
Kennedy. But not before director Alan Arkin staged it as a farce, allowing audiences to "feel the thrill of truth diluted with the other thrill, of pure theatrical invention." And "Carnal Knowledge," Feiffer reveals, was a play until Mike Nichols told him it should be a movie, agreed to direct it and cast Jack Nicholson and Art Garfunkel as the leads.

As a senior citizen, Feiffer says his new family backed him into a "joyously accidental career" as a creator of children's books. With the election of Barack Obama he "rediscovered illusion." And yet, for better and worse, for Feiffer happiness remains a term of ambivalence, "entangled with so many other feelings, among them rage."

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