Schmidt returns in retirement

He is lonely and his life is hardly serene - beset by the problems of those in his circle.

Schmidt Returns in Retirement

Schmidt Steps Back
A Novel
By Louis Begley

Alfred A. Knopf. 352 pp. $25.95

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

For better and worse, Albert Schmidt is old school. Like his creator, he is a Harvard man and a corporate lawyer.

Schmidt is a gentleman, a sophisticate, a square, a swine, and an anti-Semite. He cannot remember saying no to any woman who offered herself to him, "except perhaps the flirtatious propositions of old hags in the Hamptons, widows or writers or editors." He is a truth-teller, who can be as tough on himself as he is on others. He is hard to like and yet, somehow, he can be likable.

He is also the signature character of Louis Begley, a Harvard-educated lawyer who headed the international practice at the New York-based firm of Debevoise and Plimpton. Begley was 58 when he published his first novel, Wartime Lies (1991), which was loosely based on his experiences as a Jewish child in Nazi-occupied Poland. Since then, he has been a prolific writer.

Schmidt Steps Back is Begley's third Schmidt novel. Having retired to spend time with his terminally ill wife, Schmidt finds that his trials have only just begun. He is madly in love with Alice Verplanck, the beautiful and frustratingly elusive French widow of his former partner. He is at odds with Charlotte, his daughter, her (Jewish) husband, and the in-laws from hell. And he must decide how much emotional and financial support to give Carrie, a twentysomething Puerto Rican waitress, and the son she has decided to name Albert.

With subtlety, intelligence, and wit, Begley gets inside Schmidt's fertile WASP brain as he tries to understand his own behavior - and the behavior of others. Schmidt notices that the office of Charlotte's therapist is singularly impersonal, without a diploma or a picture of wife, children, horses, or sailboats anywhere. Instead there are lithographs of old New York and photographs of Freud, Jung, and Wilhelm Reich.

When Dr. Townshend appears, Schmidt is sure that he is the product of a prestigious boarding school and an Ivy League college, but as he listens to this "nice, rational, attractive man" he cannot help wondering about the man's
mother and father. Had Townshend been inoculated somehow "against parent poison"? Or might this shrink-out-of-central-casting erupt one fine day "in his nice Carnegie Hill duplex, assault his nice can-do wife, batter his nice kiddies as they get home from Chapin and Buckley, and then hang himself" by tying one end of his suspenders (which Schmidt just knew were from Turnbull & Asser) to one end of the banister, looping the other around his neck, easing himself over the side "and poof."

The novel is set in the 1990s and 2000s, a time when, according to Schmidt, the "carryings on of a narcissistic man with a taste for slutish women and fast food" led straight to "eight years of the darkest misrule in America's history." It is in the context of a world gone mad, with its Oklahoma City bombings, dot-com bubbles, 9/11s, and financial meltdowns, that Schmidt steps back.

To be sure, he still enjoys an escapade in Eastern Europe and a bedding that begins with the personal ads of the New York Review of Books. But he has become the "we" of no one, he is lonely, and he has scaled down his expectations: do good work for the philanthropic foundation he runs, "protect young Albert, avoid doing harm, and escape whipping."

Louis Begley may well be too good a novelist to supply a Hollywood ending in which the old guy - and the young President Obama - get another chance. But then again, Begley has lots of Schmidt in him. He's controlled, smart, sensitive, and sentimental.

He's old school.

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