Mother craved 'elsewhere'

Richard Russo's candid memoir limns flaws and frailties with toughness, tenderness.

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler
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Jack Griffin, the main character of That Old Cape Magic, Richard Russo's last novel, has spent decades attempting, without success, to distance himself from his mother. Indeed, she keeps talking to him even after she's dead. Jack will learn, of course, that only by embracing his past can he move beyond it.

Russo is not Jack Griffin, but he, too, needs to come to terms with his mom - and tries to do so in Elsewhere. Like That Old Cape Magic, his memoir is filled with insights, by turn tender and tough, about human fidelity, frailty, forbearance, and fortitude.

Divorced from Russo's father, a drinker and a gambler, when she was young, Jean Russo made her own way in Gloversville, N.Y., a decaying mill town, in the 1950s and '60s.

She got a job with General Electric, then almost exclusively male, opened her own checking account, shared her passion for reading with her son, and convinced him he could be anything he wanted to be. Insisting they had "pledged an oath, each to the other," she followed Rick - to Arizona, where he was an undergraduate, to Carbondale, Ill., and Waterville, Maine, where he taught creative writing. But, he writes, here was always a "terrible" place for her, and there a destination she "never stopped trying to get to, where she'd be happy."

Russo is candid, at times brutally candid, about his mother's flaws. Crafting expectations and explanations "based on magical thinking" for the people closest to her, "who knew better," she did not care, he writes, whether they believed her, but only that her version of events was not publicly called into question.

Proud of her tortured logic, which she loved to "explicate, detail by wobbly detail," she preferred to resolve things badly instead of leaving them unresolved, with "a good outcome a mere possibility."

With a terrible honesty, Russo describes his response to her demands. When Jean informed Rick that she could not breathe unless all the car windows were down, objected to a table at a restaurant, or informed the server that her son would order for her, he grew weary of her "futile nonsense" and could barely keep himself from saying, "Would you please, for the love of God, just shut . . . up?"

After she died, Russo tells us, he became haunted with the realization that at some point he had given up and, without admitting it to himself, had started going through the motions, enabling instead of challenging her, and failing to find out what was really wrong: "the only thing left to say was I'm sorry and the person I needed to say it to was gone."

Russo's description of his thoughts, feelings, and actions will strike a chord with aging boomers, including me, who have contended with, or cared for, a "difficult" parent. When Jean was terminally ill, for example, Russo dreaded her good days because she had the breath, the inclination, and the will to blast the health-care workers in her facility as inattentive and incompetent and spurn the food delivered by Meals on Wheels as inedible.

The simple, but often forgotten, message of Elsewhere will resonate, no doubt, with many of us as well. No less than their parents, Russo reminds us, children are trapped in repetitive behaviors.

And, sad to say, even when it seems clear that we have done everything we could have done, and whether or not we have given
our parents what they wanted or what they needed, it seems important and right to "resist the very conclusion" that would let us off the hook.

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