Memories May Be Beautiful and Yet…
This ambitious novel touches on consequences for family members of Alzheimer’s.
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Near the end of *We Are Not Ourselves*, Matthew Thomas’ first novel, Connell Leary rescues his mother from a faith healer who channels a spirit named Vywamus. “I want to thank you for caring,” Eileen Tumulty Leary says. “I was fine, but still.” She takes him into her arms and when they are done, the teenager maintains it is the first time she ever hugged him first. “That’s not possible,” Mrs. Leary replies. “In my memory, anyway,” Connell contends. She shakes her head: “There’s more that’s happened than what’s in your memory.”

In this ambitious and beautifully written novel, set in the second half of the twentieth century, Thomas traces the mysteries of mind and memory through a multi-generational account of the Tumulty/Leary families. He touches on working-class Irish-American culture, middle-class aspiration, achievement, and anxiety, the implications of the changing ethnic and racial demography of New York City, suburbanization, and the devastation visited on family members by Alzheimer’s.

*We Are Not Ourselves* is not without flaws. Thomas’ narrative of the academic career of Ed Leary, a neuroscientist at Bronx Community College, who declines to apply for a tenure-track position at NYU and then turns down an offer of the deanship at his own institution, does not ring true. And Thomas’ comparison of Jackson Heights, Queens, where neighbors care about their neighbors, and Bronxville, New York, where Eileen acknowledges, after many years, that she doesn’t “know anyone around here,” may be a trick that he is playing, albeit inadvertently, on himself and the selective memories of his readers.

Far more often, however, as he engages emotions in exquisitely rendered vignettes, Thomas spurs readers to reflect on and re-consider the constituent elements of love and a life well-lived. Eileen remembers that her father, who drove a beer truck and was the unofficial “mayor” of his neighborhood, rubbed the feet of her mother, who worked behind the counter at Loft’s, when she reminded him that she never sat down at work, “the only time he ever behaved that way around her.” As Connell takes one of her feet in his lap, Eileen recognizes there was a history of her own career as a nurse “in the bulging veins, the cramped muscles, the corns and bunions, the calluses and cracks. She wore neat shoes, but they covered a sprawling account of an overtaxed life, and there was no hiding the truth when she took them off.”

And when Ed, her imperfect husband, is gone, Eileen understands that although she has chafed at the limits his biography had imposed on his imagination, she had taken “a certain comfort in thinking of him...
as living out the trajectory of his known life, keeping his past in place by staying put for her.” She begins to sleep on his side of the bed because when she lay on her own side she thought of “all the nights she’d slept facing away from him, and she wanted one of them back – a single one would be enough – so she could turn her body toward his.”

Thomas emphasizes that shared experiences – in what may appear at the time to be small moments – are the essential elements of loving relationships. When Connell visits his father in a nursing home, he tells him that the Mets collapsed at the end of the season, the Yankees won the World Series, and then runs out of things to say. Unable to suspend his disbelief that his father could answer questions, he did not want to disrespect him by phrasing sentences as questions, even if they were rhetorical. And so “he sat with him in silence” or played music.

For his part, Ed does not want to leave Connell with questions. He hopes his son will remember the time they spent together – preparing for spelling bees, at the batting cage, building a radio, shoveling snow, reading together at night, and “the way I rubbed your back until you fell asleep.” Most of all he wants his boy, when he is a man, to hear his voice and draw strength from it “when you feel most hopeless, when you feel most alone. When life seems too cruel and there seems too little love in it. When you feel you have failed. When you don’t know what the point is.”

At such times, and others, Ed asks Connell to “remember there is more to live for than mere achievement. It is worth something to be a good man. It cannot be worth nothing to do the right thing.”

This advice helps Connell – and Eileen, as she “clears her mind of the interfering noise of everyday life, including the loud silences when she was alone in the house.” And, if we let it in, if we really let it in, it may well help many of us.