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## **Survivor of childhood domestic violence writes unflinching new novel about Vietnam-era teen, bravely addressing impacts of family abuse**

*Lisa Braver Moss shares the quiet rebellion and silent strife of a Berkeley student*

**OAKLAND, California** – We think we know the story so well. When you ask most Americans to think about Berkeley, California, in the 1960s, they’ll likely picture flower children calling for peace and anti-war protestors filling the streets. The decade was a turning point in America, a time of radical change. And in the context of her family life, Martha Goldenthal is a radical. But her rebellion isn’t sex, drugs, or rock ’n’ roll – it’s doing well in school and escaping her academia-hating, abusive father.

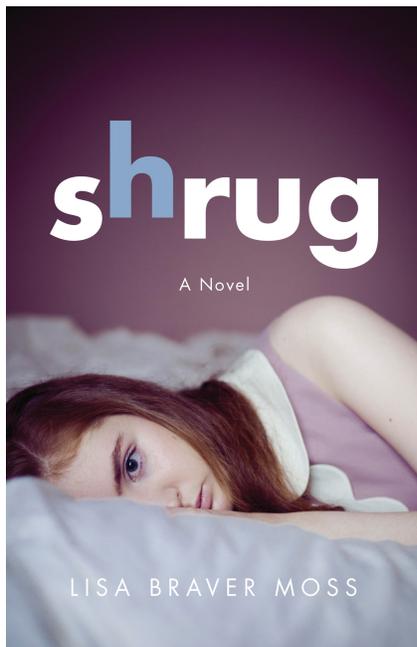
In her unflinching new novel “Shrug” (She Writes Press, Aug. 13, 2019), Lisa Braver Moss gives voice to a private narrative of the 1960s – one that quietly existed, without headlines and threats of tear gas, but still not without turmoil. Moss draws from her own experience as a survivor of childhood domestic violence who came of age in Berkeley during the seismic ’60s to craft the novel’s lead, Martha, a teenager with a nervous tic (a shrug of the shoulder) who is waging a private rebellion while her peers take part in a very public, nationwide movement.

In “Shrug,” Moss delicately navigates the complexities of family abuse through the perspective of a parentified child and her self-blame and need for control. Martha must endure her parents’ messy divorce, the loss of her father’s record store and livelihood, her mother’s heartless eviction of her from the family home, and an unlikely custody case putting her in her father’s care. Can Martha stand up to him and do the one thing she’s sure she must—go to college?

**LISA BRAVER MOSS** is the author of “Shrug” (She Writes Press, Aug. 13, 2019). She is a writer specializing in family issues, health, Judaism and humor. Her work has appeared in *Parents, Tikkun, Lilith, the Huffington Post* and more. Moss is the author of the novel “*The Measure of His Grief*” (Notim Press, 2010). Her nonfiction book credits include “*Celebrating Family: Our Lifelong Bonds with Parents and Siblings*” (Wildcat Canyon Press, 1999) and, as a co-author, “*The Mother’s Companion: A Comforting Guide to the Early Years of Motherhood*” (Council Oak Books, 2001). She is also the co-author of “*Celebrating Brit Shalom*” (Notim Press, 2015), the first-ever book of ceremonies and music for Jewish families opting out of circumcision. Moss is a survivor of childhood domestic violence and grew up in Berkeley, California. She lives with her husband in nearby Piedmont. They have two grown sons.

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## ABOUT THE BOOK



### “Shrug”

Lisa Braver Moss | August 13, 2019 | She Writes Press  
 ISBN: 978-1-63152-638-1 (paperback) | \$16.95 (paperback)  
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 Literary Fiction

Martha Goldenthal isn’t your typical 1960s Berkeley radical. Her rebellion isn’t sex, drugs, or rock ’n’ roll—it’s doing well at Berkeley High and planning for college. Her father, Jules, is a raging batterer who, because of his own insecurities, hates academia. Not that her off-the-rails mother, Willa, is much better. Meanwhile, Jules’s classical record store, located directly across the street from the U.C. Berkeley campus, is ground zero for riots and tear gas. No wonder Martha has a nervous tic—a shrug of the shoulder.

Preoccupied with the family situation and barely able to concentrate, Martha plods along in school and somehow manages to achieve. But her parents’ hideous divorce, the loss of her father’s record store and livelihood, a heartless eviction from the family home, and an unlikely custody case wind up putting Martha in Jules’s care. Can she stand up to her father and do the one thing she’s sure she must—go to college?

With its running “soundtrack” of classical recordings and rock music and its vivid scenes of Berkeley at its most turbulent, “Shrug” is the absorbing, harrowing, and ultimately uplifting story of one young woman’s journey toward independence.

### In an interview, LISA BRAVER MOSS can discuss:

- Her experience as a survivor of childhood domestic abuse and how it informed her writing of “Shrug”
- Her experience growing up in Berkeley in the 1960s
- How a difficult home situation, in a turbulent time and place, can affect reading and learning
- The question of whether, and to what extent, it is possible to break free of childhood abuse
- Why so many survivors of childhood domestic violence blame themselves

An Interview with  
**LISA BRAVER MOSS**



**“Shrug” is partly based on your own experiences growing up with an unstable home life in Berkeley, California, during the 1960s. How did you make decisions about what to fictionalize? Why didn’t you opt to write a memoir, and what value do you think fiction storytelling adds to this narrative?**

I felt liberated once I realized I was writing a novel. I think in writing my own story as a memoir, I would have felt more constrained or distracted by what actually took place, and the researching of those details may well have derailed me from the difficult task of writing a complete, satisfying read. I would’ve felt more daunted and more vulnerable. That said, fiction writing is no stroll in the park! For example, it required a lot of research about period details that I didn’t remember.

At one point, I mentioned to an editor friend, “This is fiction, not a memoir.” He laughed, and I asked him what was funny. “Memoir IS fiction!” he said, meaning that choices about tone, content, and perspective in a memoir are all subjective decisions rather than objective ones. Nonetheless, writing the story as fiction felt freeing; I loved setting the scenes and I love to write dialogue. But maybe the most concrete reason that it’s a novel and not a memoir is that the book kind of fell into place once I “got” the teenage voice.

**Some authors share their personal stories with traumatic experiences, including childhood domestic violence, through the written word and find that the process is liberating in a way. Was this your experience? How did you manage potentially triggering content?**

There were certainly parts that were very painful to write, such as the scenes of the father’s violence and those of the mother’s cruelty and maddening self-centeredness. I think I was able to manage this because I was so focused on precision in my writing. There were times when I was crying while writing, but in general my drive to “get it right” overrode the pain of the content.

The liberating thing about writing the story was that it forced me to have compassion for Martha; without this, I discovered, it was impossible to make her a sympathetic character. A pretty big consideration. So I had to adopt a loving attitude toward Martha and, by extension, toward myself. “Yes, this young woman really does deserve to be heard” was my inner motto. It was a way of retroactively loving my younger self. This helped me love my current self in a deeper way.

So, in terms of the painful content, I recognized that being able to be precise about it was key, and that helped me observe the writing adage “the more specific, the more universal.” I was ruthless about cutting out any specifics that didn’t keep the story moving or show something about character. But in general I chose my words and phrases with care as I tried to convey the scary, complex, confusing situation the main character is in.

It was liberating to write the book, sure. But have I completely broken free of the abuse I grew up with? Well, that’s a life’s work.

**Martha, the lead character in “Shrug,” seems to stand more on the sidelines of 1960s chaos and rebellion -- was this also true of your personal experience during that period? Did you feel like you were on the outside?**

I definitely stood on the sidelines during that period, mostly because I felt so overwhelmed by the things I was coping with. At the time, taking part in protests and peace rallies would have felt almost phony to me. How could I rally for peace in Vietnam when in my own life, in my own home, there was an abject lack thereof? Also, as I said, my being on the sidelines had to do with my feeling completely snowed by what I was dealing with – I had no bandwidth for any other moral battle.

**To cope with stress stemming from her family life, Martha focuses on music, academic pursuits and the unwavering support of her friends rather than turning to destructive behaviors, drugs or alcohol. Why is that the path she takes?**

That's a human mystery, isn't it? Why some people go toward self-destruction and others toward achievement? However, it may be a false dichotomy. Martha is on the academic track, but her learning ability is compromised by her extreme anxiety about what's going on at home. I would argue that her self-blame about her problems and her preoccupation with her family is to her detriment, undermining of her well-being — i.e., a self-destructive impulse. She also buys into her parents' cruel assessment of her as too rigid, too uptight, too straight-and-narrow. Also, Martha's pity for her mother, Willa, blinds her to Willa's cruelty and unreliability. Willa, it turns out, is not a worthy burden; the loyalty only goes one way.

So yes, Martha is an achiever, but she's also self-destructive in that she sees it as her duty (1) to prop Willa up and (2) to be the one to call her father, Jules, on his awful behavior, and (3) to spend a lot of her psychic energy worrying about the family situation.

I didn't want to write a book where the main character has a healthy self-esteem. That wouldn't feel truthful or real to me. But it's hard to write a character with a crummy self-image and still have the character be sympathetic. It was a challenge to portray Martha in such a way that the reader would think more highly of Martha than she thinks of herself.

**Your own experiences as an academic-minded teenager in the height of some of the most rebellious years in American history seem like an anomaly, unlike conventional depictions of this era. Why do you think that is? Do you feel like there's another side to this generation we're not addressing? And if yes, do you think your character helps give voice to those people?**

I'm confident that behind closed doors, plenty of kids were, and are, weathering circumstances similar to what Martha goes through. We have better vocabulary now for things like childhood domestic violence, but the 1960s was pre-Oprah, so to speak. We didn't talk as freely or articulately about "personal problems" back then. So, it was a radical time — and it wasn't.

My guess is that in times of turmoil and change, a good percentage of the population finds comfort and orientation in structure. I think this is true independent of trauma. In my case, I discovered at an early age that "getting stuff done" helped a lot with my anxiety. I didn't see it that way at the time, but looking back, I think my not feeling safe as a child contributed to my having a strong urge toward productivity. It was my way of trying to manage some really difficult feelings.

### **Did you have a shrug as a child?**

No, that's made up. It's a stand-in for the ways in which I needed help with thorny problems as a kid, but didn't get that help. I liked it because it doesn't have a simple solution. It's partly physiological and partly psychological — but it's clear, I think, that in a different family, Martha would have gotten help with it in some way. She may not have developed the shrug in the first place.

Incidentally, transient tics affect as many as 24% of children at some point. So a lot of kids live with this, at least temporarily.

### **What do you hope readers take away from “Shrug?”**

Not all teenage rebels are out smoking, drinking and having sex. Someone can look as if they're “on the straight and narrow” while fighting a battle that's invisible but profound. I also hope readers understand a little about how deeply self-esteem and learning can be affected by childhood domestic violence and other early traumas.

In Martha's case, she's every bit as affected by her mother's self-centeredness and cruelty as she is by her father's violence. There's not just one “bad guy;” at the end of the day, the mother is arguably more destructive than the father. It's very difficult for Martha to come to this conclusion about her mother, though, because of her mother's obvious favoritism of her over her siblings. Martha is slow to realize she's being manipulated through this favoritism. I want the reader to understand that the way in which the battered parent responds to the situation is key. In Martha's case, her mother throws oil on the fire. I'm hoping the reader takes from this that domestic violence can be a very complex problem.

Also... I have to admit I'm hoping “Shrug” will spark curiosity among some readers about the book's running “soundtrack” of classical and rock music.

### **Why do you think children living with domestic violence tend to blame themselves?**

I think it's easier for kids to blame themselves than it is to face the terrifying truth that their parent or parents, who are supposed to be protecting them, are the problem. With self-blame, the child has the illusion of being able to control the situation: “If only I could be better, this would stop.” As odd as it sounds, this is easier to swallow than the reality that the parent(s) aren't fully looking out for them. Self-blame fosters the illusion that one can control one's destiny through sheer effort and perseverance. Well, I tried sheer effort and perseverance as a kid. It didn't work! At least, not for solving the family's problems.

**What do you think about the word “victim” vs. the word “survivor?”**

“Survivor” is now seen as the proper word for those who have experienced domestic violence, sexual assault, and the like. Generally I think this is more appropriate than “victim.” However, it’s interesting that the word “victim” now has such a negative connotation that people are almost allergic to it. Actually, the idea of having been a victim as a child can be helpful to those who may unconsciously blame themselves for their awful childhoods. It can help shift the experience such that the person really “gets it” that they were not at fault. Just because you state “I don’t want to be a victim” doesn’t mean you weren’t a victim. I think “victim” can be a useful term.

In the book, Martha doesn’t look upon herself as a victim or a survivor. Rather, she sees herself as a rescuer. While she feels deeply hurt and overwhelmed by her parents’ behavior, she focuses on calling her father out and propping her mother up. Again, the “rescuer” identity is part of a system in which the victim/survivor has the illusion of being able to control his/her destiny through action.

**You have written about the Jewish faith in some of your nonfiction works. How does your faith impact your fiction writing? How does it play a role in your process?**

For me, it’s not so much a matter of faith as it is a matter of community. I think I would have found it grounding as a kid to have been affiliated with the Jewish community and connected to Jewish life. But my parents, like a lot of people who came to Berkeley in the 1940s from New York and other more traditional places, were iconoclasts who didn’t buy into the trappings of organized religion. There were plenty of other Jewish families in Berkeley that were similar to mine in this way.

I’m very involved in Jewish life, and though the book doesn’t have much specifically Jewish content, for me personally it will, I think, be a kind of “coming out” in my community. It’s exciting and scary at the same time.

**Music plays an important role in your book. What do you listen to?**

I had so much fun with this, because I made Martha’s taste and opinions virtually identical to my own. So I could wax on in my own quirky way about music through her voice, which was a welcome antidote to the book’s difficult content. As for my taste, I love most everything of Bach’s, the chamber music of the classical and romantic periods, and the orchestral works of many romantic and contemporary composers. But I also listen to rock music from the 1970s onward. The heady trance I can go into is actually the same for me whether it’s a beloved passage from Britten’s “War Requiem” or “Silver, Blue and Gold” by Bad Company. I’m not saying they’re equally deep, but they can strike the same emotional chord (so to speak) for me.

**Do you listen to music while you write?**

In general, I find it too distracting. If I don't like the music, it feels like a major imposition on my psyche; I'm too angry to write. If I do like the music, it seems to demand more of my attention than the page. But sometimes, if an idea comes to me while music is on (about how to solve a writing problem), I can tolerate the music while I scribble down my idea.

**What's next for you?**

I do advocacy work in the Jewish community on behalf of young families opting out of circumcision. I will probably continue with this work and see where it leads in terms of book ideas.