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The Measure of His Grief

A Novel by Lisa Braver Moss

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www.lisabravermoss.com.

Review by J. Steven Svoboda

Berkeley, California journalist Lisa Braver Moss, author of two prior books on families, has published her first novel. Moss, perhaps best known in intactivist circles for her several articles on brit milah including a venerable piece in a 1990 issue of *Tikkun*, has again addressed the circumcision issue, this time in fictional form.

The author deserves congratulations simply for undertaking the daunting task of tackling this heavy issue, all the more so for the funny, thoughtful, provocative manner in which she does so. *The Measure of His Grief*, in its humorous, accepting examination of the life of a lovable yet demanding and neurotic Jewish man, inevitably calls to mind the books of Philip Roth and (to a lesser extent) the humor of Woody Allen but Moss stakes out a territory all her own.

Her main character, Dr. Sandor (“Sandy”) Waldman, an endocrinologist whose parents were Holocaust survivors, is quite self-absorbed and becomes more so as he embarks on an increasingly obsessive investigation of a seemingly inexplicable sharp groin pain he experiences on the last day of sitting shiva for his father. As he delves deeper and deeper into investigations that eventually focus on circumcision, he ultimately concludes that this procedure may lie behind not only his previously unexplained pain—which may have been a form of reliving his circumcision--but also other symptoms he has been experiencing.

Sandy then embarks into a foreskin restoration process, with the whole path he has chosen inevitably exposing him to what for him at least had previously been an invisible underground of pro-intact doctors, but also anti-Semitic colleagues and—at least for Sandy—flagrantly gay restorers. Currently the Assistant Chief of Medicine, Sandy had hoped to eventually become the Chief and so when the long-anticipated retirement occurs, he finds himself in competition for the job with a younger, more savvy, and less principled competitor. However, his chances for the promotion decline as his single-minded preoccupation grows.

The tone of the book is very realistic. Sandy's odyssey launches him into extended email exchanges with his colleagues and other confrontations, some of which may endanger his career. His preoccupation also has less than salutary impacts on his sex life and relationship with his wife Ruth, an author of innovative cookbooks. Sandy starts to avoid sex and finds himself unable to confront his grief over his loss of his foreskin. Basically he drives everyone else away with his single-minded pain and focus on the moment of his circumcision.

Sandy and Ruth have an adopted daughter Amy who is nineteen years old at the time of the story and struggling to find her place in the world. Her father and she relate more as equals than as parent and child, partly due to Sandy's immaturity and Amy's own struggles to orient herself. Unlike Ruth, Amy does seem to admire Sandy's investigations and his general comfort level with confronting received truths. Amy's birth father, who is in jail, sends her a letter that Amy does not reveal to either of her parents for a few months as she struggles with the relationship she wants to have with him. For her part, Ruth elects to enter into an affair for which she seemingly feels little or no guilt.

Moss draws her characters in shades of gray, befitting real people, filled with complex motivations and contradictions.

The book starts a bit slowly and ends a bit abruptly, but in between treats the reader to a truly unique and fascinating story. She maintains a light but serious tone and crafts a book that may bring many readers who have not previously thought about the issue to investigate and perhaps ultimately—like the novel's main character—to question male circumcision. That may be Lisa Braver Moss' greatest achievement of all.