



Memento Park

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A son learns more about his father than he ever could have imagined when a mysterious piece of art is unexpectedly restored to him

After receiving an unexpected call from the Australian consulate, Matt Santos becomes aware of a painting that he believes was looted from his family in Hungary during the Second World War. To recover the painting, he must repair his strained relationship with his harshly judgmental father, uncover his family history, and restore his connection to his own Judaism. Along the way to illuminating the mysteries of his past, Matt is torn between his doting girlfriend, Tracy, and his alluring attorney, Rachel, with whom he travels to Budapest to unearth the truth about the painting and, in turn, his family.

As his journey progresses, Matt's revelations are accompanied by equally consuming and imaginative meditations on the painting and the painter at the center of his personal drama, *Budapest Street Scene* by Ervin Kálmán. By the time *Memento Park* reaches its conclusion, Matt's narrative is as much about family history and father-son dynamics as it is about the nature of art itself, and the infinite ways we come to understand ourselves through it.

Of all the questions asked by Mark Sarvas's *Memento Park*—about family and identity, about art and history—a central, unanswerable predicament lingers: How do we move forward when the past looms unreasonably large?

Memento Park Details

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From Reader Review Memento Park for online ebook

Nancy says

Each book we read takes us on a different journey--and, this will be a trip I remember for a long, long time. Mark Sarvas' novel was both troubling and compelling and I found myself reading it very quickly because I needed (not wanted, but truly needed) to know its outcome. BUT, when I finished reading the contemplation began.

This is a book to savor---maybe in its aftermath, like I am doing., or perhaps as you are reading it. The relationships between the protagonist and his family, his friends, his colleagues, are all less than we want to experience in a hero. But, he questions. And, he seeks. And, he changes. Perhaps he grows.

I was uncomfortable with many aspects of the book--particularly the main character's relationships with his father and his fiance, but as he worked through his questions, it raised questions for me as a reader and created a valuable literary experience for me.

It would be a stretch to say I enjoyed the book, but I valued it tremendously. Everything we encounter in life can't be easy, or accept a "simple fix"---- this complex story took me on an interesting journey and I appreciated the ride.

Netgalley provided me an advance copy of this book in return for an honest review.

PattyMacDotComma says

4.5★

“ . . . and I can only think about all I have squandered, the astonishing lack of care with which I have blundered through life. So much beyond recovery, things that can never be restored, truths devoured by time, by neglect.”

Matt Santos is sitting in an auction house, after closing time, in front of the painting around which the people in this story revolve. The very existence of the painting, where it came from, and to whom it belongs, has raised all kinds of questions about Matt's family history.

The auction house security guard's shirt says VIGIL, the name of the company, but Matt reads it first as VIRGIL, so Matt addresses his internal monologue to Virgil, calling him by name throughout, which I quite liked. It gave the book a confessional, story-telling quality – a sharing of his most private thoughts which he is reluctant to face.

Matt is an actor, playing recurring supporting roles in television just often enough to be recognised in public and to earn a pretty good living. He lives in L.A. with Tracey, his fiancée, who is a fair, delicate model who is often away on photo shoots. A nice life, far across the continent from his difficult Hungarian father.

When he is told his family may have claim to a painting that was lost during WW2, he is intrigued.

“The easiest solution surely would be to call my father and inquire.

Ah. Easy. According to what facile definition of the word? There was nothing easy that passed between us. I was afraid of him as a boy, terror unmixed with the admiration my friends felt for their fathers, and—snicker though you might, Virgil—in truth, I feared him still. Not in the same way, not in so primal a manner—when I was a boy, the sound of his approach down the hallway could make the hair rise on my neck—but fear, nonetheless.”

His father paid more attention to his vast collection of model cars and planes, carefully displayed downstairs to be admired and taken to special sales, where Matt was then his assistant, the only time he could touch them.

“... my father avoided intimate companionship. I would watch as he hung up the telephone with someone he had known for years, only to mutter *idiot* as he retreated to his cellar full of toy cars.”

Matt recounts the past, but admits to us (and Virgil) at one point:

“My faith in my recall is shaken. I think, at moments like these, that I remember nothing, that my life is merely a script, a tale told, revised on the fly . . .”

Scripts he understands. His father, not at all. He engages a lawyer to follow up the claim on the painting and is fascinated with Rachel’s comfortable observance of Jewish customs which remind him of his father’s father, who took him to synagogue once. She is amazed that he has no idea about even the most basic stories. He is intrigued.

As he realises how shallow his own life is and wonders what his father’s past must have been like in Hungary, he begins to open his eyes. He starts with the family tree.

“These tributaries of family ran into a wider river than I’d ever imagined, and amid them all, Szantos emerged like a thin green shoot rising out of broken concrete.

...
Eventually, I returned the tree to its folder and stowed it in my drawer, uncertain what to do with it next. It had told much more than I’d imagined but much less than I’d needed.”

As a supporting actor, he’s always had plenty of idle time on sets, so to make up for the time he wasted in school, he used the time on various projects, continuing **“my irregular learning, plugging up the potholes of my scattershot education.”**

The painting becomes the latest project, but he sure learns more than he bargained for.

I enjoyed the writing, the sympathetic characters and the whole storyline. This is a very modern young man, torn between his wish to understand his father and his lifelong fear (and sometimes loathing) of him. The women, the family in Hungary, the painting, and then his understanding of what it was then and is now to be Jewish.

Thanks to NetGalley and Farrar, Strauss and Giroux for the preview copy from which I’ve quoted.

Elyse says

Audiobook- narrated by David Ledoux was a ‘perfect/terrific’ choice for this novel . David Ledoux(must give this narrator credit), became more than a voice for Matt Santos, a secular Jewish protagonist. He makes it abundantly clear that under the gruff, sardonic exterior of Matt, under his sarcasm, and occasionally self-loathing, Matt was troubled by his personal life, - [past and present] - his professional life....his relationships with his father, his fiancé, his lawyer, and his Jewish roots. I was eager to know more about the mystery that encompassed the painting and the mystery between Matt and his father.

The ranges - changes - stories within stories - details - descriptions - variations- moods and emotions changing - name it any way you want - anything but boring - in Mark Sarvas writing was exquisite....and kept me interested from beginning to end.

In the very beginning I was laughing out loud. There were sentences- not sure politically correct — but culturally from my own Jewish secular roots were very familiar. I’m not sure to be called a ‘shiksa’ today is a very nice word....and it wasn’t in my teen years eitherbut every Jewish male or female my age knows the stereotype connection between the average single curly hair Jewish guy and his desire for a beautiful blond non- Jewish girl (The Shiksa)....

And the FIRST Jewish experience Matt remembers with his grandfather - going to temple ...will have every Jewish person laughing and shaking their head. So, yesthere are a few inside secular Jewish tidbit jokes.....

But author Mark Sarvas keeps this story moving and moving WITH PLOT AND EMOTIONS. There became other times, I was so moved - or sad - I wanted to cry.

For example - Matt and Rachel are in Budapest, Hungary.....and Matt visits the “SHOES ON THE DANUBE”.” To The Memory of Victims Shot into Danube”.

People were ordered to take off their shoes, and were shot at the edge of the water so that their bodies fell into the river and were carried away. It represents their shoes left behind on the bank. And what’s even more sad to me —is how ‘hidden’ this memorial is in Hungary. NO mention of the word JEWS anywhere.

Anti-Semitism is still persistent in Hungary today.

The humor as I mentioned was wonderful (sarcastic humor).....but the sadness will be remembered forever.

I spent time looking through my own life — with family and friends - Holocaust survivors and my friends parents who were.

Matt changes- transforms by the end. He just isn’t the same guy that he was at the beginning.

Tracy tells him.....” do not make assumptions that just because you know what somebody does, you know who they are”. She was talking about Matt’s father.

Matt realized she was talking about all of us. And then.....he had an Epiphany:
A WONDERFUL SURPRISE INSPIRING ENDING!

Matt’s journey of discovery & identify — with a painting connection - (worth more than \$3 million in my mind), had me in tears at the end. I re- played those GORGEOUS FINAL SENTENCES three times yesterday.

I have many people in my life who MUST READ THIS NOVEL! I’ll listen to this audiobook again myself - there are many moments to savor.

***A special thank you to Angela for the book recommendation. Maybe one day - I would have discovered

it but I just didn't see it. Thank you very much for making 'sure' I knew of it! Keep them coming..... lol.
??

Thank You To this wonderful author: MARK SARVAS!! Your book touches our hearts....and you're an extraordinary storyteller/ writer!

Robert Blumenthal says

This is a beautifully written story of a son trying to connect with a distant father wrapped around a mystery involving a painting that was discovered that had been stolen from a Hungarian Jewish family by the Nazis in WWII. Matt is a semi-successful young actor in Hollywood, the son of a Hungarian immigrant. He is informed that a painting that was owned by his family has been discovered and that he could claim it and take possession of it. There is some mystery around this painting, the most significant being why Matt's father wants nothing to do with it. Matt is intrigued and works with Rachel, a beautiful and religious Jewish lawyer to do the necessary legal process to receive the painting, which is worth millions.

The gist of this story is peeling away the layers of the strained relationship that Matt has with his father, who is rather abrupt and very reticent in terms of affection and emotional support. Matt is desperately trying to find some connection with his father, but the past keeps getting in the way. In addition, he becomes very attracted to Rachel, which seriously endangers his relationship with Tracy, a swimsuit model with a social conscience and heart. There is also Matt's search for deeper meaning in a spiritual sense. He is essentially an atheist and is enticed by Rachel's religious life, but it is very difficult for him to grasp it for himself. But the relationship between father and son is what really drives this novel.

There is quite a bit of introspection going on here, laced with a slightly sarcastic wit. Matt makes some pretty lame decisions during this journey, and he truly suffers for it. But the author is very wise and displays a keen understanding of people and relationships.

Angela M says

There have been a number of books published these last few years about a lost and found painting which becomes the link between a past and present narrative. At first I wasn't sure if I was up for another one like this, but the book description promised more. I'm glad I took a chance because I wasn't disappointed. It's about a lost and found relationship between a father and a son and about the loss and discovery of a man's identity when he is drawn into his father's past, but it is not a dual time line narrative. By virtue of the first person narrative, this is such an introspective novel. It begins with Matt Santos standing before the painting that has come into his possession through restoration efforts of an organization whose mission is to return paintings to the families of rightful owners after WWII. He stands before the painting the evening before it is to be auctioned off for millions of dollars. The story is told through flashbacks in Matt's thoughts as he carries on a one sided conversation with the security guard who lurks.

It is about the painting and the artist, but it's really about relationships, especially a father and a son. There is also the dilemma that Matt finds himself in with his relationships with two women. The painting connects

the past with the present and when the truth about the painting comes to light, it connects Matt to the father he never understood. He connects to his Jewish roots as he discovers the role of it in his grandmother's fate during the round up of Jews by Arrow Cross in Hungary. I found it especially sad that so much was unknown by Matt about his father and that void created such a distance between them as well as between Matt and his Jewish heritage. It is through the relationship that Matt has with his lawyer Rachel that he begins to realize what he has missed. There are some poignant moments as he reflects on "my lost Jewish childhood" and recognition of the importance of the Sabbath. I was also quite moved by the places that Matt visits when he goes to Hungary especially the "Holocaust memorial on the Danube, sixty bronze pairs of shoes left on the embankment where many of the murders had taken place."

This is well written and quiet except for the inner turmoil that Matt experiences on his journey to know his father and himself. Don't shy away from this because you think it is a "religious" story . It is about much more - some horrific things that happened in Hungary during WWII that I just learned of, and it's about love and self discovery, things that are common to all of us.

I received an advanced copy of this book from Farrar Straus and Giroux through NetGalley.

Kati Berman says

There were many reasons I requested this book from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review. I was born and raised in Hungary, I am Jewish and my family lost many members during the Holocaust. I grew up in communist Hungary and left for America way before the fall of communism. I have been back a few times after the fall, I have been to Memento Park, the title of this novel and I have seen the shoe memorial at the shore of the Danube.

So, this book was very special for me for all the above reasons. With all that said, I liked the book, but didn't love it. Matt, (Mátyás in Hungarian) is born in the United States to Holocaust survivors, who left communist Hungary in 1956 during the student uprising against communism. His parents (now divorced) didn't talk about the war years or their Judaism, Matt grew up in a secular household, much like I and many children of Holocaust survivors did. When Matt gets a call about a painting that surfaced after many years and might have belonged to his family, his life changes. He tries to understand the story of the painting, the Jewish artist that painted it and his relationship with his father, his fiancée and his lawyer. He travels back to Budapest to meet with family members who might have known about his family owning the painting. While I loved the story itself, I found the narrative often confusing, Matt seemed to have been talking to a security guard at an auction house where the painting was put up but other times he was speaking to Rachel, his lawyer. Sometimes the timeline was mixed up also, in one chapter he is already in Budapest, in a later chapter he is still getting ready to go.

The scene at the Danube shoe memorial unfortunately was very realistic, as Hungary today is one of the most anti Semitic country in the world. Overall I give this book 4 stars.

Thanks NetGalley, the publisher and the author for this advanced copy and for the opportunity to revisit my native country and my own family history.

Zachary Houle says

As a book blogger, sometimes you take chances on seemingly unknown authors and their works with the hopes that you might be blown away. Well, I took a chance on Mark Sarvas' *Memento Park* and I'm elated that I did. This compact yet dense novel is about memory, religion, family, relationships, betrayal, art and so much more?—?but is immensely readable and relatable. Focusing on a modern-day C-list Hollywood actor named Matthew Santos (note that he shares the same initials as the author, so you can draw your own conclusions), *Memento Park* sees him acquire a valuable painting from a Jewish artist who committed suicide during World War II in Hungary. The painting's worth a cool couple of millions of dollars, and Santos has acquired it because it apparently belonged to his family before being spirited away by anti-Semitic sympathizers prior to the family's arrival in America. Oh, and the painting would have belonged to his father, but he doesn't want it. So sets forth a mystery as to what Santos doesn't know about his dad?—?a man he's been at odds with for several years?—?and all the hidden things he harbours.

The novel is told almost entirely in flashback as Santos ruffles through his memories while waiting for the painting to hit the auction block, or, more accurately, the night before it is about to be sold. Through this process, the character comes to understand the secrets that others withhold from us?—?or secrets that might be a product of our own imagining. The story offers a bit of a love triangle, as Santos is living with a model named Tracy, but also has designs on the lawyer handling getting the painting back into his hands, Rachel. However, the core of the novel is the binds of family?—?how sons and fathers bond or don't bond over shared interests.

Read the rest here: https://medium.com/@zachary_houle/a-r...

Dave says

This story morphs and disguises throughout, an occasional love story, a story of faith, the complications of a father son relationship, and the recently rediscovered painting "Budapest street scene" which has its own story. There were moments of sheer brilliance, I really enjoyed the moments when Mark directly addresses Virgil, a security guard at the auctioneers house, and the device the author uses to feel we are being directly communicated to as the readers in this master class of the slow reveal.

I would definitely recommend this to anyone interested in more literary writing, art, history, and the complications of love and family.

Thank you to the publisher for providing me with this arc available through netgalley.

Marcy says

4.5 - I was absorbed by this book from the first page. The story revolves around the recovery of a painting stolen by the Nazis from a Hungarian family.

Although the concept is not original, the storytelling in this book is. Told in the first person, full of self reflection, it very much feels like real memory; not linear but in pieces that are often humorous and heartwarming. The characters are all fully flushed and interesting, and the backdrop of Budapest and the history of the Jews there gave heft to the story.

Kathleen says

Memento Park is a story of restitution, of a man seeking to recover a painting he believes was looted from his family in Hungary during World War II. This art themed novel revolves around "Budapest Street Scene" painted by Hungarian Ervin Laszlo Kalman, history and relationships - between father and son, between client and lawyer, between Matt and his girlfriend Tracy and more.

Memento Park takes on questions of authenticity and identity. This novel is full of painting references, some authentic and some fiction. The painting "Budapest Street Scene" seemed so real that I 'googled' it and the artist Kalman and discovered that both were creations of the vivid imagination of the author, Mark Sarvas.

I was intrigued by Matt and Rachel's visit to Hungary and the description of places and his Hungarian relatives. Memento Park, Hungarian National Gallery, Dohany Street Synagogue, Heroes' Square, Kozma Street Cemetery and the memorial Shoes on the Danube Bank were unknown to me. Dohany Street Synagogue is the largest synagogue in Europe and second largest in the world.

I recommend this novel to anyone who would appreciate the many painting references, literary writing, history and the complications of love and family.

Thanks to the author Mark Sarvas, publishers Farrar, Straus and Giroux and NetGalley for providing me with an eARC of MEMENTO PARK in exchange for an honest review.

Diane S ? says

A painting by Ervin Kalman, titled a Budapest Street scene looted by the Nazis, is the background of this novel. Matt, a young Jewish man who is out of touch with his faith, is contacted by a lawyer, telling him this painting, traced back to his family, has been found. What he cannot understand is his father, who came to America from Hungary, doesn't want anything to do with this endeavor. A father who he has a estranged relationship with but do will usually jump all over anything that pertains to big money. A father who has told him little of his own past.

Not a quickly paced novel, but one that has a great deal of meaning. Matt is an interesting character, not only the contentious relationship with his father, but also because he realizes how much he doesn't know and understand. This is a thoughtful and meditative look of a man trying to discover his roots, find out why his father was the way he was and in search of the Jewish faith in which he was not raised. Eventually he will find himself in Hungary, gets in touch with the family he never knew he had but still live there. He will find out things that will change him and his life, personally and relationship wise. While there he will visit Memento Park, an open air museum containing the statues of communists, saints and heroes.

Judy Churchill says

Let me first say this is not a book I would have chosen to read but I ended up LOVING it. It is about a man's earnest look at his Jewish roots, his relationship with his father, and his own claim to adulthood and meaning. The novel's first person style is enchanting. It is altogether a worthwhile story and a must read.

Rich Szabo says

A terrific page turner mystery, actually many mysteries woven into one. Sarvas shows he is a master storyteller, the entire story a flashback that builds the supporting storylines into a thrilling and surprising climax.

I found Sarvas' exploration of the main character's relationship with his father a compelling and thick mystery of its own, aside from and combined with the mystery surrounding the painting. It led me to see my parents in a new light.

Now that I've discovered his writing I'm eager to read his earlier work, and I can't wait to see what Sarvas has in store for us next.

Candace says

This is a wonderfully written novel that offers a new take on the issue of art looted from Jewish families during WWII. Matt is set on the path of proving provenance of a painting found in Australia that is believed to have belonged to his family before the war. Matt's a working actor, pretty scattered about his career, his father, Judaism, and his relationships with others in general. He's not sure he cares about this painting for anything but the money. He makes a halfhearted attempt to confirm ownership to start with, but he becomes more engaged as he learns more about that past that made his father so harsh to him.

This novel is more about Matt's journey of discovery than it is about the art. There's a surprise at the end. Thoughtful and meaningful, and a good read as well.

Caeli Wolfson says

This book shines on every level: sentence after sentence is beautiful and precise, the characters are complicated and sympathetic, the ideas are sweeping and profound but never bear down too overtly on the reader. It's a rare novel that is as accomplished in its "meaning" as it is in its pure, old-fashioned storytelling while ALSO succeeding wildly at the language level...but MEMENTO PARK does it all. It's about history, about the lies we inhabit in order to live, the cruelty of the past, the uncertainty of the present, the complexity of marriage, the chains of family...it's a Big Book, yet it never overwhelms the reader, but invites her in. A novel to lose yourself in and then reflect upon again and again.
