

## **Yossarian Slept Here: When Joseph Heller Was Dad, the Apthorp Was Home, and Life Was a Catch-22**

*Erica Heller*

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## Yossarian Slept Here: When Joseph Heller Was Dad, the Apthorp Was Home, and Life Was a Catch-22 Erica Heller

**THROUGHOUT ERICA HELLER'S LIFE**, when people learned that Joseph Heller was her father, they often remarked, "How terrific!" But was there a catch? Like his most famous work, her father was a study in contradictions: eccentric, brilliant, and voracious, but also mercurial, competitive, and stubborn, with a love of mischief that sometimes cut too close to the bone. Being raised by such a larger-than-life personality could be claustrophobic, even at the sprawling Upper West Side apartments of the Apthorp, which the Hellers called home—in one way or another—for forty-five years.

*Yossarian Slept Here* is Erica Heller's wickedly funny but also poignant and incisive memoir about growing up in a family—her iconic father; her wry, beautiful mother, Shirley; her younger brother, Ted; her relentlessly inventive grandmother Dottie—that could be by turns caring, infuriating, and exasperating, though anything but dull. From the forbidden pleasures of ordering shrimp cocktail when it was beyond the family's budget to spending a summer, as her father's fame grew, at the Beverly Hills Hotel, Erica details the Hellers' charmed—and charmingly turbulent—trajectory. She offers a rare glimpse of meetings with the Gourmet Club, where her father would dine weekly with Mel Brooks, Zero Mostel, and Mario Puzo, among others (and from which all wives and children were strictly verboten). She introduces us to many extraordinary residents of the Apthorp, some famous—George Balanchine, Sidney Poitier, and Lena Horne, to name a few—and some not famous, but all quite memorable. Yet she also manages to limn the complex bonds of loyalty and guilt, hurt and healing, that define every family. Erica was among those present at her father's bedside as he struggled to recover from Guillain-Barré syndrome and then cared for her mother when Shirley was diagnosed with terminal cancer after the thirty-eight-year marriage and intensely passionate partnership with Joe had ended.

Witty and perceptive, and displaying the descriptive gifts of a born storyteller, this authentic and colorful portrait of life in the Heller household unfolds alongside the saga of the family's moves into four distinctive apartments within the Apthorp, each representing a different phase of their lives together—and apart. It is a story about achieving a dream; about fame and its aftermath; about lasting love, squandered opportunities, and how to have the best meal in Chinatown.

## Yossarian Slept Here: When Joseph Heller Was Dad, the Apthorp Was Home, and Life Was a Catch-22 Details

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# **From Reader Review Yossarian Slept Here: When Joseph Heller Was Dad, the Aphorp Was Home, and Life Was a Catch-22 for online ebook**

## **Janavi Held says**

This is my cousin Erica Heller's s autobiography. It is funny, ( my cousin has always has a wicked sense of humor). It is sad and poignant, hilarious and lovely in turns. A beautifully written book!. (PS. The portrait she paints of our wild Grandmother is quite accurate.....believe it or not!)

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## **Dan Leo says**

What is it like to grow up the daughter of one of the great American novelists? I suspect that the answer would be a variation of Tolstoy's opening sentence of his epic story of Anna Karenina: each famous author's family is weird in its own way. Erica Heller does a wonderful job in this eminently readable and entertaining memoir of telling us what it was like growing up as the daughter of Joseph Heller, the author of at least one of the great American novels, "Catch-22". So what was "Dad" like? Funny, blunt, self-centered, full of life, irascible, childlike, full of flaws, hearty of appetites, contradictory, human – oh, wait, in other words he was like a lot of other guys – the one big difference between him and just about all those other guys out there being that Joe was also a great writer. I love "Catch-22", I've read it twice, and, from what we learn about Joe Heller in Erica's book, his great novel was basically "Joe Heller's brain". No one else could have written it, and Joe Heller could not have written any other sort of first novel. Ms. Heller's book is written with love, but with a clear and unsentimental eye, and a great sense of humor: the good, the bad, the weird – a family different from any other family in the world, but when you get right down to it not that different. I loved this book, and now I am finally ready to read some other stuff by Joe Heller, and I have ordered his second novel, "Something Happened."

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## **Nancy says**

Yossarian Slept Here makes interesting companion reading to Tracy Daugherty's recent Heller biography, Just One Catch: A Biography of Joseph Heller. The first third of this memoir, covering events before Erica was born and her too-young-to-remember years is in an entertaining chatty style. Once she reached events she participated in, she can't maintain that light touch. I wonder how much of the reporting is colored by her own emotional "baggage" and an understandable desire to leave out some of her own faults. She reports the guidance counselor in her private progressive New York City high school telling her and her parents that the only college they might be able to get her into was Itawamba Community College in Fulton, Mississippi. Though this memoir was written when Erica was fifty-something, she reports the encounter as if this really was the school she almost attended, not some idle threat that was made because she wasn't preforming as expected, even referring to it again in the last few pages of the book. While she clearly struggled in high school, one has to wonder what that struggle really was about.

One probably should take some events reported in this book with a grain of salt. However, it adds an emotional dimension to the longer professional Joseph Heller biography and is quite short, so worth reading

if you are interested in Joseph Heller.

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## Hope says

Imagine, as a visual image, balancing with one toe (the big one of course) on the head of a pin -- one arm reaching forward and the opposite leg extended backward in a perfect arabesque. That's the kind of balancing act Erica Heller has pulled off with *Yossarian Slept Here*, her insightful, totally honest memoir about her life as the daughter of renowned writer Joseph Heller and his wife Shirley. She makes sure you know that her father does love her, in spite of his insensitivity, frequently bordering on cruelty, and almost complete lack of parenting skills. As Blake Bailey points out, in her review of *Yossarian Slept Here*, (New York Times Book Review, Sunday, August 28, 2011), "The miracle of this memoir is that it never seems less than fair: Erica Heller's worst grievances are mentioned more in sorrow (or levity) than anger, and she's careful to give her own shortcomings their due."

She also writes with affection and empathy about the many other colorful members of her unique family.

Erica Heller has a powerful story to tell and the ability to make the reader want to hear it. She's a wonderful writer --- smart and funny (her analogies are hilarious). It would be great to hear more from her, in the form of a novel next time. She could probably write a great screenplay as well.

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## Tony Laplume says

More often than you'd think, people engage in dialogues that expose what they say to having a meaning different than they intended. The keen observer will be able to figure it out. Writing family memoirs, for instance, turns out to have been one such, ah, catch-22 for Erica Heller.

This is Heller's perspective on her family, which included author Joseph Heller, famous for the book *Catch-22*. You probably knew that already, if you decided to read this. With all due apologies to Erica Heller, it wasn't to read about her life (skimpily explored) and it *certainly* wasn't because we wanted an ode to the Aphthorp. While she struggles to build a strong case against the impression readers will have of her father, as a brilliant writer, she details with incredible precision specific moments in her family's life. Great memory, you'll say. Almost *too* great...

The beginning of the memoir leaves the unmistakable impression that Erica Heller means for this to be a character assassination of her father, describing a hapless episode involving the end of her mother's life. Her parents had been divorced for years, and the daughter meant for this book to be a vindication for everything Shirley suffered when the marriage ended, and about the gross excesses that came before and after the publication of *Catch-22*.

How Erica became a horrible student is little pondered (about as scarce a topic as her brother, actually). She never analyzes anything, really; this is an emotional impression of the family's experiences above all else, one that seems to present a balanced portrait, but fails miserably at it. When Erica confesses to have never read *Catch-22*, at the end of the memoir, it should come as no surprise. She never wanted to know her father anymore than she ever did, and she betrays both him and her mother in the process.

(Here's a little conjecture, based on the available evidence from this book: Joseph Heller is born into a poor family. He goes to war, ends up feeling like a hero. He returns home, is courted by Shirley's mother. Shirley loves Joseph. Shirley and Joseph have kids, including Erica. Joseph writes a book. The book becomes wildly successful. Erica grows up hero-worshipping her father, to a certain extent. She loves the lifestyle his success gives her, at any rate. She's resentful that he spends more time in his writing career than paying attention to her. She begins to identify with Shirley's growing suspicion that Joseph's life really is about his career. Joseph cheats on Shirley. Erica believes Joseph. Joseph and Shirley divorce. Erica becomes an adult. Erica believes Shirley. Joseph determines that Shirley really was the love of his life. Shirley dies. Joseph dies. Erica writes a book about the family. She paints Joseph as the villain. She gives everyone the secret recipe. Peace at last! Right?)

Now, based on this memoir, I couldn't possibly tell you what Joseph and Shirley's marriage was like, and neither can Erica. She acts as witness, and then judge, and then jury and executioner. All this is to say, I hope one day she views all this with a little more nuance. Readers, of this book, of *Catch-22*, deserve better. I'm not criticizing Erica Heller as a person, but as a memoirist, she proves less than ideal. It's easy to complain. It's much harder to understand why things happened the way they did. This was a chance for her to do *that*. Clearly she passed on the opportunity, or never even considered it. I'm not sure which is sadder.

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### **Jeanne Arnold says**

Witty and wonderfully written, this walk through the gates of the Apthorp and into the life of Joseph Heller and his family is a jewel of a book. I expected a portrait of the famous man, but was even more enthralled with her tale of growing up in a place and time that has now vanished, as though Eloise were given a life outside the Plaza, a career and a pen. She recaptures the details of a New York childhood with a family of characters right out of Central Casting, and unbelievably her sense of humor has remained intact. I can only marvel at her generosity of spirit in regards to her difficult but brilliant father, and loved this insider's view served with love and panache.

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### **Alex says**

Erica Heller is neither particularly interesting nor intelligent. I read this book for the same reason everyone else did, which is to learn more about Joseph Heller, and that I did achieve.

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### **Matthew says**

I loved this book. That is pretty much all I need to say here in four words. I loved this book. I frigging love this book, for added emphasis. Which doesn't even have anything to do with Joseph Heller, funnily enough, despite being the subject of said book and Erica Heller's father. The only work of his I've read was *Catch 22*, years back, and while I enjoyed the humour, the pathos, the credulity of his many, distinctive, varied characters I never felt a strong urge to chase down his other fiction. *Yossarian Slept Here* hasn't necessarily made me tear my hair out at all of these Joseph Heller-less years, gone and lost forever and now don't I feel silly, so much as made me wish I'd gotten around to this very memoir earlier. Coming out of the last pages it was straight into a fuzzy glow enabled googling session of Erica, not Joe, of the Hellers I launched. For a few days I wanted to keep it going by reading what I could of interviews or essays or reviews I came across.

Like I said, I loved this book.

Erica Heller writes her own life, and that of her wider family and friends, in anecdote sized chapters which gives the impression of recalled memories, made vivid, comic, lyrical, heartbreaking, delightful at turns. The memoir is often too brisk and eager to move on to the next scene, the next location, the next argument to become sentimental. It doesn't linger long enough to become sentimental, which was for me a huge strength of the book. It's also a sign of how rich and complicated the lives of the Heller's could be, made painful and confused at times by their entirely understandable foibles.

One of my persistent complaints about autobiographies or plain bio's is the focus on the big picture moments to the detriment of the everyday. Too often the smaller stuff of real life is jettisoned to satisfy the Gods of the page count. Sure, I understand it; sometimes a person's life has so much ground to cover, so many highlights and stories and monuments to whatever it was made them so famous or celebrated, so worthy of a biography in the first place, that fitting it all in without requiring a wheelbarrow to carry it around means there are gonna be cuts. And the more common stuff is easily excised out compared to the really big hits. I love the small moments though. I love the everyday moments we all have, no matter how famous and rich.

Fantastically for me, then, *Yossarian Slept Here* has plenty of the mundane existence of the Heller family. Erica eats ice cream with her mother Shirley, post an awkward and uncomfortable chat with the school principal, worry etched on Shirley's face. Erica's brother Ted is given the new name of Zelmo by a friend, to the consternation of Shirley. Joe comes home with a goofy grin and the kind of terrible shirts he was forever proud of, and his wife less so. Joe badgering a woman for a chicken salad recipe and then never speaking to her again after she refuses to share. Food especially is a typical staple of many chapters, emerging as a central focus of their lives, but most clearly the famous author himself, who clearly loved his cuisine. It works because how many of us would say food is a central ritual and pleasure of our lives beyond the purely necessary. Details like that would probably only earn a passing reference in many another biography, but the evocative power of *Yossarian Slept Here* is built on this stuff.

I would also argue that a person's life cannot be solely summarised in the achievements and accomplishments which tend to get the focus but is so often hidden away in the everyday. Seeing the family eating burgers in their car and the myriad other such moments makes the breakdown in Joe and Shirley's relationship all the more painful to read. There is more of a sense of the immediate in this memoir, despite the recall of many events being decades done, that is more novelistic and full of feeling than it is strictly retrospective.

Likewise Erica addresses the complexity of her own relationship to her father, who emerges as a difficult, brilliant, uncompromising man easily admired but who I imagine would have been hard to be around, unless you were a close friend. And even then it could be dicey.

There is another touchstone to the book, a recurring narrative I was entirely unaware of before starting. That being the family's continued connection to the Apthorp, the apartment building they lived in for many years. The changing history of the Apthorp and the often famous residents who called it home proved a fascinating recurring bit player running alongside and intertwined with the tumultuous lives of the Hellers.

Finally, one more cute, but minor detail to enthuse about. Each part of the memoir is broken down according to which apartment they lived in at a particular time, which is about as fitting a way to portion out a person's life as I can think of, capped with hand drawn layouts of the apartment in question. The years we spend in any one place do feel like self contained units almost when we are packing away our belongings and shipping out to a new house or flat. It's a more human way of looking at a life, one defined by a metric of memories rather than accomplishments achieved, or by a certain number of years, which can be clinical and detached.

*Yossarian* is anything but clinical and detached. It's full of the joys and pains of a family who happen to have a famous author as a father.

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## Patrick says

I've never seen a book published by a major press in greater need of an editor. It wasn't just the patchwork-quilt factor, jumping back and forth in time between chapters and sometimes between paragraphs. It was the sentence construction. Examples (all *sic*):

"Meanwhile, the previous year..."

"Of course, at some point in the near future, private copiers came along..."

"It was also superb, depressing, and, many claim (including the author himself), that it was Dad's best work."

"My Shirley,' written by a man who might literally take years to craft a sentence and certainly didn't use any, certainly not these words, lightly."

I was reading less for the story than to see what the next mistake would be. As to the story, it's interesting learning more about Joseph Heller; I liked seeing how he always seemed to answer a question with another question, for example, and the anecdotes from friends were always fun (though they tended to be paragraph-long excerpts from letters that sound like responses to "Could you share your memories of Dad for my book?" requests).

By the end, I got a good sense of what kind of father Joseph Heller was to Erica Heller and what kind of husband he was to his first wife (answer to both: complicated). I wondered what kind of father he was to his son Ted, who's mostly absent from this narrative, and I wondered how his publications and the reactions to them affected him, if at all. Erica Heller's chapter on Something Happened mostly concerns her feelings at being the subject of the chapter "My Daughter is Unhappy," and understandably so - but she also calls it "hilarious but mordant, caustically wrapped, smoldering rage," making me wanting her to delve into what she thought of this and others of his books.

Overall, the book conveys that Joseph Heller is a remarkable man, and his daughter had a remarkable life under his caustic eye, and that the Aphthorp is a remarkable apartment building. But it's remarkable how much better the book could have been.

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## Ian "Marvin" Graye says

### Verbatim Purgatory

When I started to read Erica Heller's affectionate memoir of life with her father (and mother), I wondered what insights it would have into the fictional family of Bob Slocum in her father's novel, "*Something Happened*".

Was the Slocum family Joe Heller's own? Was the unnamed daughter based on Erica?

When she asks him, Joe responds to his daughter, "*What makes you think you're interesting enough to write about?*"

On the other hand, Erica has much of value to say of her father's second novel:

*"The book was 569 pages of hilarious but mordant, caustically wrapped, smoldering rage. It*



*was also superb, depressing, and, many claim (including the author himself), that it was Dad's best work.*

*"There had been arguments for years between my parents over it, over the fact that it so closely detailed someone who so resembled him and told, in the first person and in such harrowing detail, such an angry tale of one man's ennui, disgust, and scorching disappointment in, and dissatisfaction with, each member of his family, singularly and together, none of whom was named in the book.*

*"His depiction of marriage as a stifling, irredeemable purgatory that served as a home base for the protagonist's many liaisons was indisputable. But it was also my mother's concern for her children, I believe, that really precipitated the beginning of the end, the rupture rather than the rapture.*

*"There were years of verbatim conversations contained in it, and the dynamic between father and daughter - in all of its complicated, weary miscommunication and cutthroat struggle for the power that a father generally automatically holds - was strikingly familiar. The parental need, the perverse competition to 'outfox' the child - was that, I wondered, universal?"*

## **"Men Did That"**

Heller's novel was packed with details of Bob Slocum's philandering, though his unnamed wife seemed to be oblivious to it.

Erica reveals a time when Joe's extramarital affairs became obvious to the family:

*"...my father's decades of philandering had finally been brought to light...He began telling my mother then, according to her, about all of his affairs and indiscretions over the years with friends of hers, of theirs, students, writers, PR women, editors, butchers, bakers, candlestick makers..."*

*"At that point, my father was a man of, shall we say, robust and uncontrolled appetites. His intake was enormous."*

Ironically, Erica was speaking of his appetite for food in the second paragraph.

In an interview with the Observer's Lynn Barber, Joe Heller explains:

*"It was part of the male culture. It was not a sexual drive, it was just...I was in New York City working in an atmosphere where men did that, we'd have parties and a couple would go into a room together...He says his wife, Shirley, never accurately detected his affairs, but she knew he was unfaithful."*

This certainly accords with the rationale of the fictitious Bob Slocum. Slocum screwed around, because everybody at work was doing it. It was expected of him. In order to climb the corporate ladder, he had to get

his leg over.

### **Testing Whether the Key Still Works**

Erica sees it as a side effect of her father's charm:

*"To be fair, my father was an equal-opportunity flirt - old women, young women, the homely and the beautiful, it didn't matter. He simply enjoyed the teasing, the bantering, the constant affirmation of his effect on people, like putting a key into a car to check whether the motor starts."*

Needless to say, it took its toll on Shirley, his wife and Erica's mother.

Joe seemed to think that he could have both marriage and philandering:

*"Our love was supposed to last a lifetime..."*

### **"They Were Meshuggah!"**

Speed Vogel, Joe's best friend, elaborates:

*"Your father has the luxury of having someone in the world who is more on his side than anybody else. Do you know what that's worth? You may not realise how that alters the universe for someone and how much that means, but it means everything..."*

*"Your mother doesn't get it, does she? Shirley doesn't understand she is the love of Joe's life? That she's the best thing that ever happened to him? He has never not loved Shirley. You have to know that...They were meshuggah!"*

Joe is quoted as saying to Shirley in a moment of self-doubt before a party, *"You always worry about how you'll look and you're always the prettiest one there."*

Lou Ann, Speed's wife, adds:

*"Read his [later] books. It's all there. Look at the way he wrote about Shirley after the divorce. He always regretted leaving her."*

### **My Brain's Inexorable Slide Projector**

There are 60 chapters in the memoir, each of four to five pages average length. It's very easy to read, but still perspicacious, even if it's obvious how much Joe hurt those around him.

Amazingly, Erica's hurt started as young as four:

*"Suddenly it was open season; I had sailed from the gentle, protective cloak of my father's kindness over to the other side, the angry side filled with sharp-edged antagonism."*

Erica describes her impressions as the product of *"my brain's inexorable slide projector,"* which is also a good way to describe the form of the memoir.

The book ends with some quotations of correspondence with other writers, such as Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie and Christopher Buckley, the latter of whose comments are good assessments of Joe's *"nonornamental"* style:

*"He did not strive to be witty or to dazzle. He was amused but mostly repelled by professional talking heads, those conveyor belts of forced insight...behind the warm smile, he had a switchblade-sharp mind, and his fraud detector...was as fine-tuned as a Predator drone."*

#### **SOUNDTRACK:**

(view spoiler)

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**Karina Vargas says**

## ***Yossarian durmió aquí* : ¡4 estrellas!**

Joseph Heller fue un escritor que saltó a la fama con la publicación de su primera novela *Catch-22* en la década del '60, una crítica satírica al servicio militar de Estados Unidos. La trama de ese primer libro delata el ingenio único y el humor irónico del autor, que se evidencian también en sus personajes, especialmente en el protagonista, Yossarian. Pero hay otras facetas de Joseph Heller, como amigo, enemigo, esposo, amante y padre, que solamente sus allegados pudieron conocer. En esta suerte de memoria de una buena parte de su vida, a cargo de Erica, su hija, se puede llegar a conocer un poco mejor quién era y cómo era, sus virtudes, defectos y miserias. Un relato divertido que, aunque no se priva de contar secretos familiares y rencores, está lleno de emoción y ternura.

Este libro fue justo lo que necesitaba, era lo que estaba buscando y más. El relato de Erica es siempre muy ameno y divertido (claro, la manzana no puede caer muy lejos del árbol). La familia entera, con Joseph a la cabeza, es muy peculiar y graciosa.

Está dividido en cuatro partes y tiene capítulos muy cortos, cada uno con títulos implícitos y bastante curiosos. El relato repasa la vida de Heller y la de su mujer, cuando se conocieron, sobre la abuela Dottie, la infancia, adolescencia y juventud de Erica y su hermano, los viajes, las vacaciones, los trabajos, las fiestas, los amores, las peleas y las muertes. De alguna manera, incluso cuando no le incumbe o no debería aparecer, todo gira en torno a ese hombre, a veces de la manera más insólita. Cada vez que me sentaba a leer este libro, tenía la sensación de que una vieja y querida amiga se sentaba a mi lado y me empezaba a contar las anécdotas más entretenidas de su familia. Me sacó sonrisas varias veces y me emocionó otras tantas. La pasé muy bien.

Quiero aclarar que no es requisito haber leído *Catch-22* o alguna otra de las obras de Heller (yo sólo leí *Catch-22*) para poder comprender esto, o algún guiño o referencia que se haga sobre ella. Si lo hiciste, quizá recuerdes alguna escena o percibas una analogía entre el autor y un personaje, o la forma de pensar, pero nada más. Si no lo leíste, eso sí, tal vez te den muchas ganas de hacerlo. O no (los que leyeron la confesión de Erica me van a entender).

*Yossarian durmió aquí* es la excusa perfecta para contarnos que Joseph Heller fue un gran escritor, una mente inteligente, y a su vez un hombre contradictorio y hasta infantil, que cometió errores como todos lo seguimos haciendo mientras estamos vivos. Erica es la responsable de acercarnos un poco más hacia ese costado humano de su padre, con todo lo que eso implica, donde el amor entre ellos aflora en cada broma o cada pelea que se repite como un ciclo. Heller fue todo un personaje en sí mismo, tanto para sus seres queridos como para aquellos que sólo llegaron a cruzar un par de palabras con él; y creo que, además, así lo seguirá siendo para quienes leamos este libro y descubramos a la persona detrás del famoso autor de una de las novelas más reconocidas de los últimos 60 años.

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## **Barry Hammond says**

The daughters of famous men (especially those designated geniuses) often seem to have a very difficult time in life. It was true of a recently-read memoir by Orson Welles' daughter and seems also to be the case with Erica Heller, daughter of Joseph, the famous author of *Catch 22*.

Perhaps it's the ego required by any artist or the demands of fame but the families of such men seem to get short shrift in the attention they require growing up. To be fair, Erica Heller's memoir isn't a bitter one. Despite quite a few legitimate grievances (including a prolonged and acrimonious divorce with her mother,

during which he insisted her mother's accurate detailing of his numerous infidelities were hallucinations and delusions on her part) Erica Heller has a humourous affection for her father's many foibles, which included a razor-sharp and corrosively caustic sarcasm - a quirk of his also detailed in Bruce Jay Friedman's memoir, "Lucky Bruce." It was a part of his personality which made Friedman uneasy but seems to have been accepted by his daughter as part and parcel of who Heller was.

There are dozens of interesting stories here for literary fans or even just those with an interest in the variety of the human animal. It can be harrowing at times as the younger Heller is frank about such things as learning disabilities, cancer, divorce, and psychological trauma but it's honest. It's also something of a history of the Apthorp apartments in New York city, where both Heller and his daughter lived and a window into both other famous residents and its origins and changes throughout the years.

The reader even gets a recipe for pot roast that the author withheld from her father for years at her mother's request. All in all a satisfying and insightful read. - BH.

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### **Jeff Bursey says**

Erica Heller (b. 1952) is the daughter of Joseph Heller. Her autobiography is incomplete (years are missing, some of her illnesses and relationships get referred to but not always in detail), and her biography of Heller has gaps, though it is a monument to his psychological, as well as verbal, meanness. Her brother Ted gets the best line (it would be a shame to say it here), but is otherwise rarely in the book. Shirley Heller, their mother, seems to have been treated very poorly by Heller (and by Erica, though less so), while the maternal grandparents look to have been good candidates for Gamblers Anonymous. There is much here that's not said, or known only later, and many incidents where Heller's treatment of Erica (and many others) strikes me as chilling and dreadful.

If the book was better written, the content would come out in a more remarkable way; if Erica could open up about her own faults more, as quickly and as easily as she blames others for theirs (such as Valerie Humphries, Heller's second wife, who never gets named, which is either erring on the side of legal caution or plain rudeness), then this would seem a more compelling document, and she might appear as a more sympathetic individual. Her own moroseness as a young teen, and her often mentioned inability to study at school, go unexamined, but they do bring up vital questions: did she have a learning disability, or something that prevented her from concentrating? Was she nervous at home thanks to Heller's tongue (or wit, as some would call it, she included), or because of the undercurrents of dissatisfaction her parents felt as time went on? For some other reason? There are important topics she doesn't engage with. Instead she provides mini-biographies on Mario Puzo and Speed Vogel, and many remarks on the apartments her family lived in. Erica's short-lived marriage to Pieter van Pan is barely discussed, and not at all within the context of a child of divorced parents going through a divorce herself.

It doesn't help that she jumps around from date to date, often without good reason (when she supplies dates), and from person to person. Hopefully Tracy Daugherty's biography will supply more context. But for anyone who wants to be reassured that writers can be lousy parents, and spouses, this book is proof.

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### **Phyllis Raphael says**

The memoir genre could have no better spokeswoman than Erica Heller. "Yossarian Slept Here is a dazzling book; witty, moving, perceptive and incredibly generous. Critics have remarked that Erica Heller has inherited her father, Joseph Heller's gift for storytelling but frankly I think it's all her own. She's a kinder writer though honest and without a shred of sentimentality. The story of what happens when success come to a family and it's outrageous father has been handled in these pages with the skill of an original literary winner. I sped through it compulsively and wished it would never end. I give it five stars. Phyllis Raphael

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## David Downie says

This book should be required reading for anyone interested in Joseph Heller, memoir, New York City, recent history, and much else.

As the book's title and subtitle suggest, this is a hybrid. A biopsy of the building, its history and residents, the real focus of Yossarian is Joseph Heller and his long-suffering wife Shirley, Erica's mother. Erica plays a supporting role in the Hellers' Bermuda Triangle; her younger brother Ted makes cameo appearances and remains an enigma. The bittersweet tale of this over-achieving, angst-ridden family's rise in postwar Manhattan, its wrangling and tragicomic fall, is at turns laugh-aloud funny, brilliantly observed, somber, obsessive and depressing. If it were a movie, it could be co-directed by Mel Brooks and Alfred Hitchcock.

What keeps you turning the pages deep into the night is Erica's skill at spinning the yarn. In her hands, the Heller family's self-lacerating irony and wit is eau de vie, sending down a variety of horse pills.

Comic relief is welcome. After her parents' acrimonious divorce, Erica visits her nonagenarian maternal grandmother. "I suddenly realized that every photograph containing my father, her ex-son-in-law, had been cut apart," she writes. "And that in each one, instead of a head or a face, in its place was now stuck a cotton ball."

What's in a name?

Do not be daunted by the title: Yossarian might well win a National Book Award for the most cryptic, insiderish tag of 2011. Think Napoleon or Lord Byron, who famously slept everywhere. Then recall that Yossarian was Joe Heller's doppelganger, the heroic antihero of *Catch-22*.

Before it became one of the most frequently misused expressions in modern English, *Catch-22* was a bombshell novel about the random craziness of World War Two, among other things. It was published in 1961. If you missed the novel, you might remember the movie (1970). If you missed both, you are fortunate: read and view them now. They may well change your life, and also entice you to read Erica Heller's memoir.

Both it and *Catch-22* are bleakly hilarious. Yossarian is a testament to the destructiveness of narcissism; *Catch-22* was deeply, riotous anti-war and joyously absurdist. The right book at the right time in the right place, as the 1960s progressed, *Catch-22* became the literary talisman of anti-Vietnam youth. It sold millions, and is still in print.

*Catch-22* certainly shaped the outlook of this reader. Like many of my generation I devoured it when I was attending high school. Might Joseph Heller be indirectly responsible for this blog? It would be impossible to calculate how many lives were shaped—in some cases warped—by Joseph Heller. He was much more than a consummate stylist. His world-view seemed to my adolescent mind to merge with a peculiarly American

genius Dostoevsky, Conrad and Camus. His descriptions of World War Two also rang true: my father had fought in Italy in the same places as Yossarian-Heller, in eerily similar circumstances.

Curiously, Erica Heller reveals in this memoir that she has never read *Catch-22*. Whether she inherited her knack for pithy prose from her father is impossible to know without genetic testing and exhumation. They were both advertising copywriters and shared a mordant, irreverent, at times sardonic wit.

An unforgettable instance of this revolves around a family trip to Italy in the 1960s. Erica's brother "opened his mouth to ask a question that I still love to recall: 'So who's the guy on the t in all the churches?' After clarifying his question, my parents explained to him about Jesus Christ."

Genetic science may one day tell us whether talent may be transmitted down the generations. More likely, Erica Heller's skill and her personality were branded and bruised by the hammering and fire of her father's forge. His was a relentless demand for perfection.

Students of Joseph Heller's life will be well served: the memoir skillfully reveals countless details about him and his rituals, shedding light on the mechanics of how he wrote. He "dreamed and scratched and scrawled his slow and carefully chosen, spidery words onto index cards and yellow legal pads," she notes. "He then typed them onto his rickety machine, hunting-and-pecking his way to more opulent times."

Complex and troubling, Joseph Heller was clearly not your run-of-the-paternal-mill presence in the lives of his wife and children. Charm and literary skills aside, what comes through when reading this self-effacing and at times self-deprecating story is that Erica was spared the genes carrying her father's less admirable traits.

A fantasist and philanderer, Joseph Heller appears in these pages as lusty, brash, funny, and sufficiently self absorbed to alienate even his most devoted friends and family members, including Erica. She loved and revered him but, "Suddenly it was open season," she writes about the beginning of hostilities. "I had sailed from the gentle, protective cloak of my father's kindness over to the other side, the angry side filled with sharp-edged antagonism."

To her credit, she forgave him more than once for emotional injury, and out of her experience has crafted a heartfelt, moving memoir.

Highly recommended.

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