

**Review of *The Absent Father Effect on Daughters: Father Desire, Father Wounds* by Susan E. Schwartz**

Schwartz, Susan E. *The Absent Father Effect on Daughters: Father Desire, Father Wounds*. Routledge, 2021. 176 pp. ISBN-10: 0367360853 / ISBN-13: 978-0367360856. \$160.00 (cloth) / \$38.95 (pbk).

Reviewed by Peter A. Huff<sup>1</sup>

The absent father and the father-daughter relationship have been seriously under-studied phenomena in Jungian literature for decades. Jung, a father with four daughters and a famously complex family history, barely touched the subjects. Erich Neumann's classic *The Great Mother*, the magisterial work on the universal goddess archetype published nearly seventy years ago, represents a trajectory of speculation and scholarship highlighting obsession with matriarchy that virtually defined the limits of the Jungian imagination for generations of researchers and therapists. Susan Schwartz's investigation of the distant and domineering father, addressed from the point of view of the daughter, breaks with this pattern and embodies a convergence of previously unaligned interests. Communicating profound empathy and unblinking attention to documented lived experience, *The Absent Father Effect on Daughters: Father Desire, Father Wounds* sheds new light on what for untold numbers of people is the most mysterious and highly charged relationship of their lives.

Schwartz, educated at Cincinnati's Union Institute and University and the Jung Institute in Zurich, brings to her topic a rich interdisciplinary orientation and a blended methodology rooted in both critical thought and clinical practice. Her book offers multiple views of fathers unavailable and sometimes abusive and the many ways in which daughters respond and seek healing and wholeness. Drawing upon theorists such as André Green, Hester Solomon, Julia Kristeva, Helene Deutsch, Andrew Samuels, and Jean Knox, Schwartz applies the work of analysts and thinkers who have effectively mined the father-daughter dynamic irrespective of psychological creed or lineage. Hers is a nonsectarian and undogmatic approach. Myths, fairy tales, and ancient sacred texts are woven together with classics from the modern Western literary canon. The heart of her project, though, is testimony from clients, some actual, some composite, who know firsthand what it is like to be daughters of remote and dictatorial fathers. Dreams and insights from Aurora, Hailey, Jade, Rayelyn, Shiloh, Grace, Kaleigh, and over a dozen other women, identified only by first name, anchor the conclusions of the book to the concrete trials and trauma of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood in the shadow of detached and severe older men.

The fifteen chapters of the volume review the numerous varieties of the absent father effect: from mirroring a deceased father to constructions of the "as-if" personality, the "daddy's girl" phenomenon, and the "needy psyche" of narcissism (137). Schwartz introduces her extensive study as a story of unrequited love, but by her own admission it unfolds into much more than that. Concentrating on "psychological life affected by the

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://doi.org/10.29173/jjs179s>

absent father personally and collectively” (1), her investigation exposes misdirected desire and dysfunctional forms of love competing with various types of counterfeit love and many species of outright betrayal, abandonment, and exploitation. A masterful exploration of diverse narratives, her book weaves together unscripted stories of suffering, conflict, anxiety, discovery, resistance, and, in some cases, liberation.

Throughout the work, Schwartz’s clients report near-lifelong states of feeling threatened, trapped, ignored, reviled, incomplete, and empty. At the same time, they narrate personal life stories of passion, risk-taking, perfectionism, and remarkable success. A memorable case-study chapter concentrates not on a twenty-first-century informant but on the life and letters of the twentieth-century American writer Sylvia Plath, whose provocative poem “Daddy” has long been interpreted as a desperate attempt to come to terms with a father who died too soon and demanded too much. The final chapter, one of the best and most compelling, explores the ways in which the absent father, often experienced as a wall or cage, can ultimately function as a “significant entry gate to transformation” (164). Arguably, Schwartz is strongest in the chapter on the dialogic character of effective therapy. Her perceptive comments on familiar processes such as the reflective function, the transcendent function, and transference and countertransference reveal the sort of wisdom won only from the labor of self-conscious human encounter and rigorous attention to the craft of therapy as both science and art. Her insight into the absent father’s haunting presence in the daughter’s therapeutic experience—and the therapy room itself—speaks to both the uncanny ubiquity of the father figure and the urgent need for a book such as this.

Schwartz’s engaging study of fathers and daughters addresses a notable gap in the analytic literature and points the way toward helpful future research. Her fluency with a broad range of theories and approaches is admirable, and her sensitivity to the nuances of her clients’ varied experiences suggests a practice based on deep intentional listening and courageous trust in the process. The book is limited, however, by its failure to inquire more systematically into the cultural, ethnic, economic, and class dimensions of the daughters investigated. From the data presented, it is impossible to determine to what extent male privilege and white privilege may have conspired in any number of the family situations. Though unnamed, a mainstream North American set of perspectives is assumed and a normative capitalist colonial context unquestioned. Gender, too, is curiously under-explored. Though the diversity and fluidity of gender identity and expression are acknowledged, no attempt is made to foreground the complexity of gender in the father-daughter relationship. Schwartz rightly wrestles with the conventional animus idea as “an irksome concept, out of date, misogynist” (99) but does not demonstrate how even the best of Jung can be reconciled with the basics of contemporary theorists such as Judith Butler. The experiences of queer and transgender women receive only passing attention, and the gender of fathers, arguably a key to so many dynamics of any father effect, absent or present, is almost completely ignored. Likewise, spiritual background, identity, and aspiration receive little more than minimal treatment. Schwartz seems to work with women for whom the structures of patriarchal religion are relatively unproblematic and the natural and supernatural father figures of traditional faiths surprisingly unthreatening.

On the literary level, undisciplined use of epigraphs and over-reliance on floating quotations, unintegrated into the texture of the argumentation, distract from the overall effectiveness of both Schwartz’s study and her prose. The pattern is evident in every section

of the book but is especially noticeable on the final page. Where the reader expects an arresting closing statement of findings, a dramatic verdict on significance, or a bold gesture toward broader implications, what is delivered instead is a morsel of wisdom from Rainer Marie Rilke with no direct bearing on the subject and an almost gratuitous quotation from the Daodejing—neither of which summarizes or underscores Schwartz’s important conclusions on wounded and desiring daughters and deserting and disappointing fathers.

Despite these limitations, Schwartz’s *The Absent Father Effect on Daughters* is an original, well-conceived, and inviting contribution to contemporary post-classical Jungian scholarship. It provides generous space for examination of a tragically disregarded topic and avoids the rigidity and reductionism too often associated with a deliberate break in academic trends. With its respect for agents’ descriptions, the book also adds significantly to the growing literature on abuse and will be greatly appreciated by survivors and their allies. Specialists and practitioners will find much that advances their field. General readers will profit from the uncensored voices of women confronting one of life’s most fundamental relationships.

### **Contributor**

Peter A. Huff, MDiv and PhD, is a religious studies scholar with experience in academic administration and university, hospital, and parish ministry. He has held endowed chairs at Xavier University and Centenary College and currently teaches world religions at Benedictine University in the Chicago area. The author or editor of seven books, including *Atheism and Agnosticism: Exploring the Issues* (ABC-CLIO, 2021), he is a contributor to the forthcoming *Martin Buber: Creaturely Life and Social Form* (Indiana UP).