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## **'Universe': You Can't Make This Stuff Up**

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Memoirs have gotten a bad rap in recent years, what with James Frey's "A Million Little Pieces" debacle and lawsuits challenging Augusten Burroughs' bizarre depiction of his childhood in "Running With Scissors." Too often in the pursuit of a compelling story, authors have played fast and loose with the facts.

But Nancy Bachrach persuades her readers that she's giving them the straight story, because it's really hard to believe anyone could make this stuff up.

Granted, she is depending on that fallible Muse, Memory, recalling events from early childhood to the present and using reconstructed or invented dialogue, as memoirs often must do to keep the narrative lively. But her acidly funny exasperation, her palpable pain, her volatile mixture of love and loathing for what her parents put her and her siblings through feels genuine. And it makes for riveting reading.

Her tale focuses on her mother, the inimitable Lola Bachrach Hornstein, a brilliant woman bedeviled by childhood abuse and mental illness, a mother who hopped in and out of mania while raising three kids who apparently inherited the high IQ but were spared a lifetime perch on the bi-polar seesaw. Deeply loved and defended by husband Mort, who attributed Lola's frequent spinouts and hospitalizations to her simply being "under too much pressure," Lola dominates the family.

In one memorable scene, Nancy gives us Lola in full cry, insisting to Mort and the kids that she is "the center of the universe." The way Nancy describes her, you can see why they believe she may be right.

Mort had a failing of his own, and it proved a lethal one. Ironically known as "Mr. Fix It," he was famous for his do-it-yourself repair work, almost none of it done right. When he jerry-rigs the generator on their boat, he turns it into a fountain of carbon monoxide fumes. He also

disables the blower that would have dissipated them. Then he and Lola decide to spend a chilly night on the boat and turn on the heat. Uh-oh.

That's when Nancy, at the time a 33-year-old successful advertising executive working in Paris on a futile campaign to persuade the French that they'd prefer to smell like Teen Spirit than perspiration, gets the late-night phone call no one ever wants. It's her doctor/pianist brother, telling her Mort has died and Lola is knocking on heaven's door. Nancy expects that by the time she flies home to Rhode Island to join him and their art-therapist sister, a double parental funeral will await her.

That's the point at which the story begins, giving Nancy (who uses Bachrach as her professional name) the opportunity to tell us some family history, which is full of surprises. With a grandfather who was the chief Orthodox rabbi of Rhode Island (and unfairly prosecuted for bootlegging), a federal-judge uncle who goes to jail and another uncle who may have been a professional assassin, an "aunt" who was really a mother, a grandmother who was into gambling and petty crime and some close Bachrach ties to the Patriarca mob family, Lola begins to look fairly staid by comparison. This part of the story is rollicking stuff, but dark currents underlie the hilarity.

Lola's condition seems hopeless, the result of oxygen deprivation made even worse by ill-advised medication. But deep within this severely damaged woman is a will to survive, and step by highly unlikely step, Lola begins, quite miraculously, to heal.

As she does, the book's tone changes, too. Nancy is sharply sarcastic in recounting her childhood and mordantly funny in her description of Lola's hesitant recovery and her children's bewildered attempts to assist it. But by the time the book ends, love has conquered chaos, tenderness flows like a healing balm and Lola's insistence that she is the center of the universe doesn't seem so crazy after all.

•Carole Goldberg is a member of the National Book Critics Circle.

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