

## MEMOIR IN SEARCH OF UNDERSTANDING

a review by  
*Josephine Humphreys*

Judy Goldman. *Child*.  
University of South Carolina  
Press, 2022.

**JOSEPHINE HUMPHREYS** is an American writer, born in Charleston, SC. She has four published novels, including *Nowhere Else on Earth* (Viking, 2000; reviewed in *NCLR* 2002), an historical novel featuring North Carolina's Lumbee Robin Hood of the Civil War, Henry Berry Lowry. She also listened to and transcribed the life story of Ruthie Bolton, *Gal*, which Harcourt, Brace then published in 1994.

**JUDY GOLDMAN** is the author of now three memoirs, two novels, and two collections of poetry. Her writing has appeared in literary magazines like *Southern Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Ohio Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Shenandoah*, and *Crazyhorse*, as well as *Real Simple*, *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, and *Literary Hub*. She has received the Irene Blair Honeycutt Lifetime Achievement Award, the Hobson Award for Distinguished Achievement in Arts and Letters, the Fortner Writer and Community Award for "outstanding generosity to other writers and the larger community," and the Beverly D. Clark Author Award from Queens University.

I've just finished reading Judy Goldman's new book, *Child*, a memoir about her relationship with Mattie Culp, the black woman hired to care for Judy as a child in Rock Hill, SC, during the 1950s. I am deeply moved by this honest look at a complicated and important relationship, one I've often thought about.

The best memoir (okay, the kind of memoir I like best) is not simply a collection of the writer's memories – not history, not autobiography, not a report. Instead, at its best, I think of memoir as belonging to the genre of mystery, with the memoirist as a kind of Agatha Christie sorting through available clues in search of understanding. First of all, what happened, exactly? And then, why? This is precisely what Judy Goldman asks in *Child*. I have never read a memoir that so intimately involves the reader in this sort of sleuthing. Let's figure this out, Goldman seems to say, and we're with her from the first sentence. We struggle with her through the developments that were hard to understand and the troubles that arose. We worry with her when she fears she may sound paternalistic. She invites us to share the writer's secret doubts and hesitations and to help solve the mysteries.

It is that sense of investigation shared between writer and reader that makes *Child* a remarkable achievement. The mystery to be solved is one that many of us have known, especially those of us who are older Southern white women: the sur-



COURTESY OF JUDY GOLDMAN

prising and abiding love we have felt for black women, especially those who were hired to raise us during the years of segregation and segregation's aftermath. This love is not a new thing. You can find it even occasionally in slavery times. Calling it "love" is clearly irrational, contradictory, self-serving, and yet, weirdly, somehow true.

Although I'm definitely an "older Southern white woman," I never had the kind of experience with a nursemaid that Goldman describes. But I will remember forever an experience that had a similar effect on me. Riding a Charleston city bus when I was about seven, I was the only white person on board. In the back, a dozen black ladies sat together, headed home after working in downtown houses. I had been told to call them women, not ladies, but that made no sense to me, like other things I didn't understand. In this sixty percent black city, I had no substantial connections with black people, but I was aware. I knew about slavery and

segregation and racism. And I knew those things were wrong. So I felt distinctly uncomfortable on that bus, and a little bit afraid. The black ladies surely hated me. Why would they not? I tried not to look their way, but when we turned north from Broad onto Meeting, approaching my stop, I had to walk back to the exit. The door was already open; all I needed to do was go down the three steps and then out onto the sidewalk and I'd be free. But something went terribly wrong.

I was so small that, when I started down the steps, the driver could no longer see me in his mirror. My head was below the level of his view, blocked by a metal partition. Just as I was about to step onto the sidewalk, he closed the door, thinking I'd already gotten off. The bus began to lurch forward. I panicked and burst into tears.

All of a sudden a cry went up from the ladies. "Stop the bus!" they yelled to the driver. "Stop the bus!" Two ladies jumped up from their seats and came to my side. "It's all right, baby," one said. "It's all right." The bus stopped, the door opened, I was released. They had saved my life. Well, of course that wasn't exactly true. I probably would not have lost my life if I had missed my stop. But something had happened, some kind of truth had been shown to me, something clear and real and important. "It's all right, baby." I can still hear those words. I was, and am still, grateful. In a way, they did save my life. I loved them.

Ideally the best kind of memoir will have a certain looseness, some threads that need tying up, just as a mystery novel may not solve the entire mystery. A piece may be solved, a perpetrator named, motives explained, but always a sense of deep mystery remains, and that is the treasure of Goldman's *Child*. As she works through her memories of the past and her love for Mattie, Goldman asks, and answers, a number of smaller mysteries. Why did Mattie leave her own child to go live with a white family and take care of someone else's child? Why did Mattie not want Judy to go to church with her? But the larger and clearly more important mystery is the South itself, its divisions, its violence, its beauty and humor and religions and stories and contradictions. What are we to make of this place we love and inhabit? And what are we to make of ourselves?

Toward the end of *Child*, Goldman writes,

Can we trust anything inside the system we were brought up in? A system founded on, and still dependent on, oppression? Can I see the world as it really was, as it really is? And has it even changed that much? Black maids calming cranky white children in grocery store checkout lines. Hispanic nannies pushing white children in park swings. So many women, so many years, taking care of other women's children. (134)

Her answer, to herself and to us, is this: "What I've finally come to: It is possible for love to co-exist with ugliness."

I want everyone to read this book because it's true, and it's important. It's a reminder that there has been love between us and there can be more. Love can co-exist with ugliness, and then proceed to conquer it. ■



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