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BRAKHAGE'S CHILDHOOD

Jane (Brakhage) Wodening

Granary Books (\$39.95)

Traditionally, history has either downplayed or entirely erased the contributions made by the spouses of male artists, a particularly shameful sexism when the woman in question is an artist herself. Jane Brakhage, now Wodening, was Stan Brakhage's collaborator. Not only were her body, her marriage, and their children subject matter for her husband's early lyrical cinema, she was an active participant in his filmmaking, which he integrated into his daily life like no other artist before or since. Furthermore, Wodening is a talented fiction writer in her own right, and the author of several books. When she first began writing, Wodening "wasn't interested in making up stories . . . I was writing to understand the world, to understand what was happening in my life." Her decision to write met with resistance, including a poet who told her "There can be only one artist in a family." In a passage that will surely feel familiar to many women, Wodening admits that "I wrote only when I wasn't busy raising our five children, minding the house, helping Stan with his films and handling the film business."

Brakhage's Childhood is a collaboration between Stan and Jane born of hours of inter-views she conducted during the disintegration of their thirty-year marriage; a remarkable document, it combines his memories with her subtle yet insightful prose. The story is presented in first person, as if the filmmaker were speaking to us; yet, the text has been shaped by her pen. Wodening describes Brakhage as a person with "the most amazing memory I had ever encountered." She found his childhood stories "so charming . . . [and] exotic" that she asked his permission to "write them up . . . as a narrative." She took notes as he spoke, then typed up each chapter based on those notes. What she has achieved cannot be understated: nearly every line in this

nearly 300-page work captures Brakhage's speech patterns so faithfully that without the prefatory matter one would be forgiven for mistaking the book for his memoir. Although she edited the stories to her liking, he did not ask her to make any additional changes: "The changes I made in the stories were minimal but the bitterness and hatred he had for his mother I left out. . . . I changed the tone of the book from that of a highly articulate but resentful fifty-year-old man to the dependent submissive tone of a child."

As film scholar P. Adams Sitney recalls in his introduction, Stan Brakhage was a "charismatic raconteur" and a "mythic figure" who expected devotion from his many disciples, his wife among them. Sitney interviewed Brakhage about his collaborations with Jane for the introduction to the filmmaker's seminal *Metaphors on Vision*. He was also one of the first people to publish Jane's writing (in *Film Culture* 29), and was aware that she was working on a book called *The Autobiography of Stan Brakhage*.

Wodening's preface tells us that Stan had "the self-centered arrogance of a lonely and spoiled child who would rage to get his way." Since he did not reveal any examples of raging during childhood, she speculates that as he became an adult he learned to use his anger "as a tool" to control others. Sitney ended his friendship with Brakhage after witnessing him bullying Jane and the children. While he stops just short of using the word "abuse," both he and Wodening refer to Brakhage's "rages." Wodening describes Brakhage as a "natural magician," a constant talker who masterfully employed "hypnotic or otherwise irresistible imagery, telling one thing, or many things, keeping the actual thought hidden." She recalls that he was "usually a pleasure to converse with, to think with, although some- times he'd talk in circles out of nerves He wanted respect, always, so sometimes there were days when I did nothing from dawn to dusk but listen to Stan talking. I would drop in a relevant comment here and there."

The book tells the story of Brakhage's life from birth through junior high, and places what psychologist Tony Pipolo terms the filmmaker's "pathological narcissism" into context. Pipolo, who wrote an article on Brakhage's film *Tortured Dust* so insightful that Jane sent copies to all of her children, has the advantage of access to Stan's letters, and insists that careful reading allows one to distinguish between Stan and Jane's point of view: "The eloquent and restrained prose of Jane Wodening . . . strikes a perfect balance, never allowing her knowledge of the man— as well as the child in the man—to interfere with her respect for the subtle evocations of literary form." Pipolo's brilliant essay is the perfect lens through which to view the psychological complication of an autobiographical text penned by the soon-to-be ex-wife of a brilliant narcissist who demands complete submission from his family:

Over and over in his interactions, cruel or insensitive treatment of others is rationalized as serving the truth at all costs. As any psychoanalyst knows, a patient who persistently clings to a particular virtue has conveniently appropriated that virtue as a defense. Insisting on one's truthfulness is the most suspect of all since "truth" is often relative, can be bent to one's will, fused with insidious behavior, and made to serve the ends of a defensive ego.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for one who became a singular visionary obsessed with hypnagogic vision, Brakhage's first memory was dust motes floating in sunlight. Another influential early memory was seeing himself on a movie screen in a local newsreel. Despite being overweight, asthmatic, and having terrible eyesight, he knew even as a young child that "I deserved attention," and that "I was different from the grownups. Perhaps it was because I had hope." Young Stanley enjoyed singing, reading comic books (his favorite characters were the Green Hornet and Dick Tracy), and going to the movies. As a child, Brakhage especially enjoyed newsreels and serials, and his love for movies continued for the rest of his life. He regularly attended Hollywood movies years after establishing himself as a pioneering avant-garde filmmaker:

Movies were and are my solace and the deepest connection I know that relates me to humanity. In movies, I can feel the heartbeat of the culture, the warmth of it entering my spirit, feeding me, soothing me, guiding

me. Movies would show paths, styles, mythologies, identities, lives to live, attitudes to look through like a lens or wear like a mask, to wear so closely as to almost become one with. . . . no matter how silly or light or inconsequential the movie might have seemed to others, it was deeply, urgently, seriously important to me to go to it, to connect again with the source, the rhythm of the culture, for me, the rhythm of life.

Despite what he describes as almost daily bullying, it was apparent early on that he was intellectually superior to his classmates. Brakhage believed that much of his ambition stemmed from a desire to please his adoptive mother, Clara: “Although she never achieved anything like culture herself, her ambition for it burned high for me to achieve it and achieve it I did, much to her joy.” He speculates that his ability to read and carry on conversations with adults at four years old may have caused the other children to target him. Brakhage felt that there was a significant connection between his childhood suffering and his later aesthetic breakthroughs. Brakhage was not shy about proclaiming his genius:

I am as fiercely defensive as anyone, as Freud himself was, of my neuroses and my illusions and my delusions. Ezra Pound was called insane with the epithet “delusions of grandeur” but he was grand! He was accused because . . . he called himself the greatest poet alive—and he was that! And I too, am great, I am very great, it’s not a delusion, it’s the simple truth. I’m great and I have a destiny and anyone who gets in my way must be working for the evil one!

Even under threat of bodily harm, Brakhage refused to tone down his brilliance: “False modesty erodes integrity and integrity is what my destiny is made of and without my destiny, I die. I would rather die fighting than false. This I proved in pre-school and have been proving ever since.”

Abandoned by his biological parents, afflicted with many physical maladies including asthma and hernia, and passed around from one adult to another so that his adopted mother could work and spend time with men as she wished, Brakhage’s slow boiling resentment was born of a Dickensian series of humiliations and neuroses. He never forgave his adoptive parents for leaving him alone so often. He spent so many evenings outside waiting for hours for Clara to pick him up that he came to see himself as “a drag on her love life . . . she’d just as soon I’d die.” Among the questionable environments where she left him to fend for himself was Harmony Hall, a hellish summer camp that he describes to Wodening as a repository for freaks and unmanageable children.

In order to survive parental neglect and the daily torment of his peers, Brakhage learned to steal money from purses, shoplift, and bribe bullies with malt balls. He even briefly led a gang of young thieves. Young Stanley believed in angels, and enjoyed putting on shows for others. He was such a good singer that he came to believe that he was “an instrument of God.” He found true power in his “perfect pitch,” a “sweet clear voice” strong enough to solo on Bach’s Cantatas. He also possessed a passionate patriotism, participating with pride in the neighborhood paper drive during World War II. He eventually turned away from a life of crime, in part because a friend’s mother sparked in him an interest in great literature. As an adult, Brakhage retained a deep knowledge and respect for poetry and literature. As the book ends, adolescent Stan Brakhage expresses a desire “to develop my power,” and develop it he did, in hundreds of films that sealed his reputation as one of the great visionaries of the twentieth century.

Although the book was written during a very painful time in her life, Wodening comments that she is “glad it all happened as it did . . . I can only assume that we stopped the interviews, stopped the book, stopped the marriage, at exactly the right moment.” Wodening has so embodied the spirit of her former husband that the book can be read as a form of channeling, a magical evocation of this larger-than-life artist’s spirit that shall be treasured by all serious scholars of his work. *Brakhage’s Childhood* is all the proof one needs that Wodening herself is a brilliant master of her craft.

—Christopher Luna