

# Memoir deals with a mother's absence

Last week this column focused on a book about an absent father. This week we're going to take a look at a book about the absence of a maternal presence.

"Mother Winter" is a searing new memoir by Portland writer/artist Sophia Shalmiyev, who came to this country in 1990 when she was 11 years old. Shalmiyev had spent her childhood in Leningrad.

Her dad is an Azerbaijani Jew, a psychotherapist who sometimes resorts to physical violence. "He slapped me so that I would stop trying to be a person who'd fail at making him swell with pride each time he looked at me, talked about me, or thought about me . . ."

Her mom — Elena — is Russian, an alcoholic who shows up only intermittently throughout Shalmiyev's childhood.

Shalmiyev's two grannies, steeped in the old ways, try to pick up the slack.

But then Shalmiyev's father takes her with him



## THIS WEEK'S BOOK

"Mother Winter" By  
Sophia Shalmiyev  
Simon & Schuster –  
280 pp — \$25

when he flees Russia as a political refugee. They bounce around from Austria to Italy and finally land in America, settling in New York.

As a teenaged "changeling in America," what Shalmiyev wants most urgently is to fit in.

"I will not ask about my mother . . ." she writes, "until I speak English without an accent . . ."

She accomplishes this by studying reruns of "The Bionic Woman."

Some time later, a young woman whom her dad had had an on-and-off-again relationship with back in Leningrad will join them and become Shalmiyev's step-mother. Luda is only 12 years older than Shalmiyev. Their interactions will be fraught.

After high school, Shalmiyev travels across the country, attends The Evergreen State College, and works at a peep show in Seattle. She auditions "feminists, writers, activists, painters, ballbusters, killjoys, sex workers, gay men" as figures to fill the maternal void.

They are, she writes, "a fantasy caretaker army . . ."

And as she grows into young womanhood herself, she begins to grapple with the depth of emotions and sensations her mother might have

experienced. It is only then that "I will become unmute at last. I will ache at the source. And I'll try to see her."

But by the time Shalmiyev finally travels back to Russia and searches for her mother, Elena has vanished from official records and become hazy in people's memories.

Shalmiyev writes to the mother who will never read these words: "There is a word for fatherlessness — bastard — but what is the word for your kind of absence, one without a grave or a phone number to call?"

She returns to the Pacific Northwest and creates a family of her own — marrying an American and giving birth to a son and a daughter. But how does one mother without having been mothered?

"Mother Winter" is a contemplation of femininity and feminism, of sexuality and surrogacy, of violence and of nurture.

Shalmiyev tells her story in scrappy, trenchant

vignettes. This is such a heart-rending tale — a reminder that mothering . . . make that parenting . . . can be complicated. It is essential, yet not everyone is adept at it.

The Bookmonger is Bar-

bara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at [bkmonger@nwlinc.com](mailto:bkmonger@nwlinc.com)

## Crossword Answers

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| T | O | N |   | I | W | O | N | T |   | B | A | U | M |   | S | T | O | L | E |
| A | T | I | T |   | M | A | C | R | O |   | A | L | S | O |   | H | A | D | A |
| M | I | N | E | R | A | L | H | A | R | D | N | E | S | S |   | A | V | E | R |
| P | O | T | L | U | C | K | S |   | C | O | A | X |   | S | O | M | E | D | A |
| A | S | H | E | N |   |   |   | S | H | U | N |   | O | C | C | U | R |   |   |
|   | E | S | S |   | T | E | M | P | E | R | A | T | U | R | E |   | N | A | T |
|   |   |   |   | T | H | E | R | O | A | D |   | A | T | A | L | L |   | N | H |
|   | S | P | O | I | L | E | R | S |   | I | S | M |   | B | O | O | S | T | E |
| T | A | R |   | P | I | N | A |   | A | L | U | M |   | S | T | O | P | I | T |
| E | N | O | L |   | C | O | N |   | N | O | B | I | S |   | S | N | A | P | U |
| R | S | T | U |   | W | I | N | D | S | P | E | E | D |   |   | D | A | D | S |
| P | I | E | R | C | E |   | S | E | R | T | A |   | A | A | H |   | E | P | O |
|   | M | C | C | O | Y | S |   | W | E | I | R |   | S | U | I | T |   | A | R |
| R | E | T | H | R | E | W |   | E | A | T |   | T | I | N | F | O | I | L | S |
| T | O | E |   | T | R | E | E | S |   | S | E | C | T | I | O | N |   |   |   |
| E | N | D | S |   | E | A | R | T | H | Q | U | A | K | E | S |   | R | A | G |
|   |   |   |   | B | A | S | R | A |   | A | U | N | T |   |   | G | E | T | U |
| I | M | P | A | R | T | S |   | F | L | A | K |   | T | I | A | M | A | R | I |
| B | I | E | R | S |   | O | N | A | S | L | I | D | I | N | G | S | C | A | L |
| E | N | E | R | O |   | F | I | V | E |   | S | E | R | G | E |   | H | I | T |
| X | E | N | O | N |   | F | L | A | Y |   | T | W | E | E | D |   | N | Y | E |