

Press Release



Assembling My Father: A Daughter's Detective Story

by Anna Cypra Oliver

- [About the Book](#)
- [About the Author](#)
- [A Conversation with Anna Cypra Oliver](#)

"Oliver's careful detective work spans decades, probing worlds as different as Jewish Queens, N.Y., in the 1940s, and Taos, N.M., in its late-'60s heyday of hippiedom . . . [Her] memorial to her elusive dad — and the way researching and writing it changes her own identity — is **unforgettable**." — *Publishers Weekly*

"**Stylistically innovative** . . . [Oliver's] is a voyage of discovery. An emotional demonstration that Humpty Dumpty can be put together again." — *Kirkus Reviews*, **starred review**

About the Book

And so, skin pasted to muscle wrapped around bone, joint slipped into joint, I reconstruct him. I . . . struggle to remember a man I don't remember, a man who is for me at every point in his life a man who dies at the age of thirty-five.

When Lewis Weinberger killed himself in 1974, the troubled young architect left behind a trunk of photographs, a handful of construction receipts, two cameras, his divorce decree, and a postcard from a woman named Lynn. From this dearth of physical evidence, Anna Cypra Oliver set out to reconstruct the father who died when she was five. **ASSEMBLING MY FATHER: A Daughter's Detective Story** (Houghton Mifflin; August) is her remarkable chronicle of this quest and a quintessentially American story of reinvention, both successful and failed.

Blending eloquent narration with photographs, journal entries, and even doodles culled from Lewis's papers, **ASSEMBLING MY FATHER** is a completed puzzle of images and language that traces his Jewish upbringing in New York; his study of architecture; his idealistic embrace of bohemianism in Taos, New Mexico; and his eventual drug-fueled disintegration.

It is also a striking portrait of Oliver's own journey from her mother's sometimes violent Christian fundamentalist household, to an early marriage and move to Minnesota, to her eventual reconnection with her past and her Jewish heritage.

ASSEMBLING MY FATHER is an arresting exploration of lives lived on the margins of the 1960s counterculture movement. It is also a fascinating portrayal of a promising life squandered, a young writer's moving search for identity, and a hauntingly honest portrait of the ways in which we inherit the past, come to terms with the present, and shape the future.

About the Author

Anna Cypra Oliver has an MFA in creative writing from the University of Minnesota. She received a fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts for this, her first book. She lives in New York City with her husband.

A Conversation with Anna Cypra Oliver about **ASSEMBLING MY FATHER**

Your father died when you were five, and because your mother rarely mentioned him, you knew little about him as you were growing up. Even so, you didn't begin looking for information about him until you were in your mid-twenties. What made you decide to search for him then?

My interest in finding out who my father was and why he died coincided with a number of significant changes in my own life. My mother, who came from a cultured New York Jewish family, had become a hippie in the late 1960s, and then, after a series of crises that included her divorce from my father and his subsequent death, she converted to fundamentalist Christianity. From the time I was twelve, we were members of an extremely conservative and fervid Pentecostal church. I attended Bible college, and at nineteen I married a man whom I met on campus.

Until I was in my early twenties, I was active in the church and a dedicated fundamentalist. But then my faith started to collapse. From the beginning, there had been a conflict in me between Christianity and my early memories of our freewheeling hippie life, as well as a stark contrast with the world I experienced whenever we visited my mother's adamantly secular family. I had always been a passionate reader and had a deep-seated longing to be a writer. By the time I reached college, I started to hate all the restrictions of fundamentalism. There were so many books I wasn't supposed to read because they were considered decadent, so many ideas I wasn't supposed to entertain because they were condemned as corrupt, so many areas of the imagination that were off-limits.

The constraints became more and more intolerable, as did the narrowly defined role I'd assumed for myself as a young Christian wife. In my mid-twenties, I sank into a profound depression. I was overwhelmed by a numbing array of rules and restrictions. I went through a period of weeks when I couldn't stop crying, and in the midst of it I began to experience a

powerful longing to find out about my father. He was almost a complete abstraction to me, but I knew he had been a voracious reader and that people who knew him considered him to have been extremely intelligent. My father became symbolic for me of a world I had been taught by the church and by my mother to despise, but which I now wanted access to: a world of the mind and the imagination. I needed permission, as it were, to pursue my own creative and intellectual impulses, and because I knew my father was someone who loved books and ideas, I looked to him to give it to me. I was also interested in reconnecting with my Jewish heritage and with my Jewish family, and he embodied both.

Considering what happened to your father, did you find him a problematic role model?

No question. Significantly, when I first began to reconstruct his history, I focused only on who he had been in his early life — not on what eventually happened to him. After my parents split up in New Mexico, where they had gone to join the counterculture, my father became a drug user, a drug smuggler, and, eventually, a suicide. I never imagined he was anything but a deeply flawed individual. It was only later, as he began to take shape as a real person and not just the idealized role model I needed as a guide, that I was able to look at his failings, and, ultimately, at his disintegration, too.

Your mother is featured in the book almost as prominently as your father and is not always portrayed in a flattering light. How does she feel about what you have written?

I was terrified of how she would react. She had made some undeniably extreme choices — she abandoned her middle-class life to become a hippie; divorced my father for no reason that she could or would articulate; took up with a series of violent, authoritarian men; and then, to cap things off, became a fervent fundamentalist Christian, though her family, as I have said, was Jewish, not to mention liberal and atheist. My brother and I were dragged along with her as she went through each of these dramatic transformations. I felt that it was my right to tell the story of my own childhood, even if it sometimes cast her in a harsh light, but I was afraid of hurting her, too.

I built up five years' worth of anxiety about it, but when I finally let my mother read the book, her response was so measured and caring that she astonished me. She is still a Christian, but in recent years she has become much more tolerant of other people's belief systems — or lack of them — and much more open to ideas, even if they aren't sanctioned by her church. As she read my manuscript, she kept calling me up to correct my grammar — not to challenge my portrayal of her, but to correct my grammar! I loved that, because it reminded me of what a literate, interesting person my mother is. It revived a connection that had been lost between us in her most ardent fundamentalist years. Most gratifying of all, my mother said that the book gave her a valuable perspective on her own history — that it helped her to assemble herself.

Architecture plays a prominent role in your book. Can you explain its significance to your story?

My father was an architect — or at least he had a degree in architecture — and when I was a child, growing up on communes and in plywood shacks with no electricity or running water,

his profession was the one thing I knew about him. My mother's family placed a great deal of emphasis on professional achievement, and though I knew nothing about architecture, the word "architect" conveyed a kind of intellectual artistry to me, as well as a pleasing sense of status. That word defined my father for me. We knew a lot of marginal people in the hippie world, people who were attracted to it because they couldn't function in the mainstream. We joined the counterculture very late, after much of the ideology and political activism that animated the movement in the early stages had given way to a summer-camp sort of mentality, in which people were just looking to have a good time or to escape. "Architect" conveyed to me the sense that my father wasn't a drifter, like so many of the people who populated my childhood, but a person of culture and substance.

One of the central figures in the book is Stephan Klein, one of your father's childhood friends. You met him in 1995, during an interview for this book. Over the course of the project, you became romantically involved, and in September 2003 you and he married. Can you comment on that rather surprising sequence of events?

The relationship that developed between Stephan and me was one of the most unlooked-for outcomes of this quest. Stephan was a witness to my father's life, as well as a phenomenal researcher. He acted as a kind of guide for me in my search for knowledge about my father, but I never anticipated the outcome.

At the time we met, we were both in marriages that were breaking down. I was desperate to escape a stifling, overly constrained life, and here was Stephan, someone who had read widely, was interested in everything, thought deeply about everything, and was always excited and engaged by the world. Nothing could have been more attractive. He was also Jewish, which was important to me. The relationship really began as an e-mail exchange, initially focused on my father. For me, our conversation in letters produced a creative flowering unlike any I'd ever experienced. Those letters developed very quickly into a profound and lasting attachment.

The peculiarities of the situation did not, however, escape my attention. Stephan and my father grew up together in Queens, and he, like my father, became an architect. I was well aware of the Oedipal implications, but the fact is, Stephan was not my father. He was a person in his own right. I was also a fairly wise twenty-eight-year-old who had been married at that point for eight years. I'd had two alcoholic stepfathers, witnessed years of domestic abuse in my childhood home, and experienced the violent deaths of both my father and my first stepfather, who died in a drunk-driving accident when I was nine. Even as a child, I was always serious and thoughtful, while Stephan struck me from the beginning as extraordinarily youthful, in manner and outlook — much more youthful than I had ever been. Even now, people say, only half jokingly, that I'm the older one in our relationship.

Your book is a collage made up of fragments of narrative as well as reproductions of photographs, drawings, newspaper articles, and handwritten journal entries, among other things. What drove you to structure your narrative in that way?

In some ways, the structure of the book reflects the magnetic attraction I always feel toward collage in art and literature. I grew up in an environment where meaning was dogmatically fixed, set in stone by God and delivered to us by our pastor, God's mouthpiece on earth.

Nothing can be more deadening to the mind and spirit than to be told not to question, not to think, not to explore and freely interpret based on one's own perceptions. The juxtaposition of elements in collage, on the other hand, suggests the desire to give up interpretive control, to release the mind into a free state of play. The parts jostle against one another, sparking associations, combining to generate meaning, but always suggesting that the pieces were chosen by one discriminating consciousness, and that they could — in another mood, at another time — just as easily be arranged in another way by someone else, or that other pieces could be substituted.

I began my quest with almost nothing — no stories, few mementos and pictures — and ended up with a whole collection of items that belonged to my father. People kept sending me things. I was given a journal my father wrote at the end of his life, a tape with his voice on it, letters, home movies, pieces of jewelry he had made for his lovers, books and record albums that were among his favorites. I was excavating my father's past and, as I dug, these were the artifacts that turned up in the ruins.

My father's history had to be culled from an odd, mostly random collection of scraps. To reconstruct what happened to him, I had to read the clues to his life that were inscribed in each artifact. I had to comb through receipts and old address books, like any detective. By including the items in the book, I wanted to invite the reader to participate with me in that effort, as well as to equip him or her with the knowledge to dispute my conclusions. I didn't feel that it was possible to describe my father or narrate his history in any definitive way — even if he were alive, it wouldn't be possible, because people are so complex and contradictory — and I wanted the reader to see how difficult it could be to establish the truth of the past. My father was a real person, with a real history. Facts and chronologies were important, yes. I was thrilled by any and all documentation. But the father I've portrayed is also my creation, produced at a particular time in my life out of a particular need.