

A Spoilt Boy – a memoir of childhood – by Frederic Raphael. Orion, 2003.

Some devotees of the work of Frederic Raphael may be unaware of the fact that by birth he is an American, born to an English father and an American mother in 1931 in Chicago.

A Spoilt Boy is an engaging and at times uncomfortable memoir of a child who, as an observer of everything going on around him, a self-made insider who nevertheless always felt himself to be an outsider, a person whose awareness of his Jewishness suffused much of his interaction with others, as well as generating huge ambivalence and occasional self-hatred, is very much the father to the man.

Naturally, Raphael writes superbly, and although he makes no attempt to see his early life other than through the eyes of an adult, he nevertheless presents a powerful image of a driven child that many Jews who went through the English public school system will have no trouble in comprehending.

Some of the reminiscences in A Spoilt Boy, most connected with anti-Semitism or its anticipation, are painful; others are amusing in such a profound way as to give an insight into the depths of the resources on which Raphael drew to get him through.

In his conclusion, while expressing gratitude for the good things that have happened to him, Raphael still leaves the reader with a sense of a man who, though replete with success, remains somehow dissatisfied, unsure of where he belongs, and somehow resentful that the principal burden laid on him by his parents – his Jewish status – had not been placed on other shoulders.

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