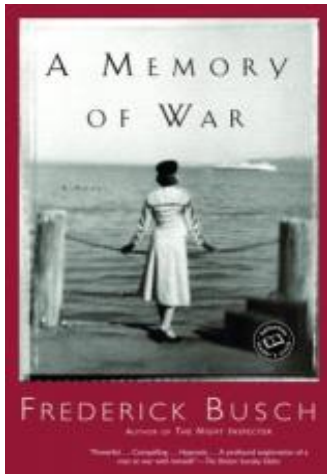


A Memory of War

by Frederick Busch



About the Book

Psychologist Alexander Lescziak savors a life of quiet sophistication on Manhattan's Upper West Side, when a new patient declares he is the doctor's half-brother, the product of a union between Lescziak's Jewish mother and a German prisoner-of-war. Suddenly Lescziak finds his world closing in on him, as events acquire new significance: his failed marriage, his wife's possible affair with his best friend, and the disappearance of his young lover, who also happens to be his suicidal patient. In search of answers, Lescziak delves into the recesses of his own mind, when the past threatens to press in inexorably upon the present.

Discussion Guide

1. For all the characters' histories presented, we are only in Alex's consciousness throughout the novel. From what point in time is Alex remembering all these events? What is the significance of that? What is the purpose of Busch having one character create the experience of memory for the other characters?
2. Busch uses repetition and variation of a certain set of words? i.e., chatter, pant, verge, panic, tingle. What is the effect of this repetition? Why does it become important?
3. Alex's father's name is Januscz; Nella's former boyfriend works (Alex thinks) for Janus, the investment firm; many characters have names that feature double consonants: Nell; Teddy; Otto; William, etc. What do you make of all the mirroring? Can you find other mirror effects in the plot itself?
4. Time travel is mentioned several times. Why? How does the impossibility of real time travel comment on the process of memory? What about the mention of Alice in Wonderland?
5. Continuing the mirror idea: How do each of the major characters embody differing aspects of Alex's self? Can we

trust these portraits of characters he paints as anything other than those aspects? Can you find points in the novel where Alex states plainly that this is what they are?

6. Three main occupations are pursued by those in Alex's present: the arts, the law, and psychoanalysis. If "All your clues are from Freud and my wife?" what are we to make of Busch's use of these three? What of the women? Liz, Detective Rhys, Nella? who have the starring role (and Alex's desire) in each?

7. In their final meeting before Januscz becomes aware of Sylvia's infidelity, Alex, who is conjecturing this entire scene, has Otto and Sylvia discuss the conjecture of memory just so the loved one might be remembered. This is one of the scenes in which Busch brings two major forces of the novel—talk and love—together, making them nearly one and the same. In what other scenes does this equating occur? How do the nature of love and talk change for Alex over the course of the novel?

8. During the meeting with Grensen, Busch alternates between repeated uses of the color white and invocations of the pristine calm of Nella's father's house with Otto's endurance in the dark horror and filth of the death camp. As these are taking place in Alex's mind simultaneously, what is the implication of this back and forth? How does Alex's imagining of Sylvia's imagining Otto's experience echo what Alex has told us of his time as a very young child in Barrow? At what point does the "white" of Nella's childhood become sinister? What is the meaning of "storming in heaven"?

9. The novel ends as it begins, with a memory of his father, but a much different memory. Discuss how that memory has altered. How did the meeting with Nella's father influence the change? What does Alex gain in return for his re-remembering?

10. Is it important, ultimately, whether or not William Kessler is actually Alex's brother? Why did Kessler's arrival precipitate Alex's crisis and generate this elaborate effort of personal revision?

11. The William Carlos Williams poem that Alex remembers stealing, as a child is evocative for several reasons. Note the isolated word in each stanza; note also Alex explaining the meaning as being agricultural. How does this help render the memory as organic and appropriate to the narrative flow of his memory in general?

12. Also in regard to the poem: Williams speaks of the precise choice of detail that will turn an idea of an image into a concrete experience for the reader. Why is this poem essential to understanding how Alex is telling us his ideas about his life, his past? What is Busch saying about exactly how we make our memories real for ourselves?

13. The element of choice in memory notwithstanding, the novel faces the hard fact of a horrific set of historical events. Given what Alex tells us and how Busch gets it told, what do you think is the measure by which we can trust memory? What is the difference between memory and history?

Author Bio

Since 1971, award-winning author Frederick Busch has published more than twenty works of fiction and non-fiction, including the novels **The Mutual Friend**, about Charles Dickens, **Rounds**, **Invisible Mending**, **Sometimes I Live in the Country**, **Harry and Catherine**, **Long Way from Home**, and the bestselling **Closing Arguments** and **Girls**. A

compilation of his short fiction, **The Children in the Woods: New and Selected Stories**, was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1995. His most recent books are **A Dangerous Profession**, a collection of essays about the writing life, and **Letters to a Fiction Writer**, an anthology for which he served as both editor and contributor. A new short story collection, **Don't Tell Anyone**, will be published early in 2001.

Critical Praise

"Busch, a versatile writer of consummate skill, dramatizes the unexpected legacies of war and complex questions of power and duty. . . . [His] ravishing, near-thriller novel, one that should earn him the larger readership he so richly deserves, places the most private of emotions within the context of a cruel and chaotic world, and reveals the oceanic depths of our capacity and penchant for both pain and pleasure."

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