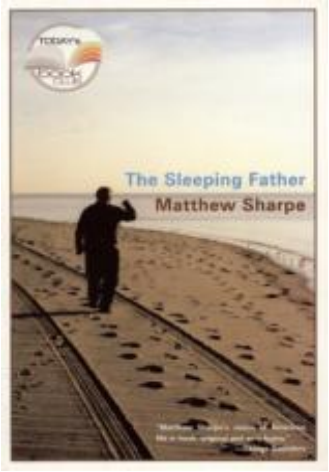
The Sleeping Father

by Matthew Sharpe



About the Book

Bernard Schwartz has lost his wife, his career, and finally, thanks to the accidental combination of two classes of antidepressants, his consciousness. He emerges from a coma to find his son Chris, the perpetual smart-ass, and his daughter Cathy, a Jewish teen turned self-martyred Catholic, stumbling headlong toward trauma-induced maturity. **The Sleeping Father** is about the loss of innocence, the disorienting innocence of second childhood, the biochemical mechanics of sanity and love, the nature of language and meaning, and the spirituality of selfhood. But most of all it is about the Schwartzes, a singular yet typical American family making their way the best way they know how in a small town called Bellwether, Connecticut.

The Sleeping Father also explores the shift in the way Americans think about mental health: away from regarding ourselves as being shaped by our upbringings and toward regarding ourselves as being shaped by the chemicals in our bloodstreams. The American family, in this novel, emerges as a microcosm of larger social institutions; moms and dads function as in-home teachers, priests, presidents, and CEOs. In focusing on the Schwartz family in crisis, Sharpe addresses the larger crisis in faith and authority in contemporary American life.

Discussion Guide

1. What might the author have intended by calling this novel **The Sleeping Father**? Does the title have any significance beyond its being a reference to the coma that befalls Bernard Schwartz?

2. One reviewer has described **The Sleeping Father** as an "inquiry into the weight of words" (Ed Park, *Village Voice*, March 3-9, 2004). What are some of the places in the book where language is not just the medium but the subject matter? What is the thematic relevance of language in this novel?

3. Bernard Schwartz's son, Chris, at one point thinks, "[W]hether you embrace irony or not, sooner or later irony

embraces you." (p. 122) What is the role of irony in the book? Is there a connection between verbal irony--in which someone says one thing and means another--and dramatic irony--in which someone expects and hopes for the opposite of what they end up getting?

4. Sharpe describes a neurologist describing Bernard Schwartz's coma: "In the room where Bernie lay inert, Lisa Danmeyer created a second Bernie made of test results and drug names and parts of the brain and biochemical causality and possible outcomes... Lisa Danmeyer's Bernie was the opposite of Jesus: flesh made words." (p. 48) The novel takes up various and sometimes contradictory ways of describing and thinking about the self: the medical, the religious, the poetic, the psychological; where and how else in the novel do you see this theme being investigated?

5. What issues of race and class come up in this novel, and how are they addressed?

6. There are a few incidents in the novel that could be construed as supernatural. And Cathy Schwartz, a Jewish girl, immerses herself in Catholicism. What do you make of the way this novel portrays the divine, and the quest for faith?

Author Bio

Matthew Sharpe is the author of the novels **Jamestown**, **The Sleeping Father** and **Nothing Is Terrible**, as well as the short-story collection**Stories from the Tube**. He teaches creative writing at Wesleyan University. His stories and essays have appeared in *Harper's Magazine, Zoetrope, BOMB, McSweeney's, American Letters & Commentary, Southwest Review,*and *Teachers & Writers*. He lives in New York City. For more information, visit http://www.bloomsburyusa.com/books/catalog/you_were_wrong_pf_871

Critical Praise

"Tragic and madcap"

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