BOOK REVIEW

The Martian’s Daughter – A Memoir

Marina von Neumann Whitman
The University of Michigan Press, 2012

REVIEWED BY:
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ABSTRACT

The Martian’s Daughter – A Memoir chronicles events covering the better part of the twentieth century from the perspective of its central figure. It also tells the story of a remarkable woman determined to neither live in her father’s shadow, nor accept society’s prescribed roles. It portrays her effort to navigate a fractured family relationship, as well as rarefied spaces in academia, government, and big business that were slow to welcome women. It is instructive for those navigating contemporary organizational cultures.

Though its title suggests a science fiction tale, The Martian’s Daughter – A Memoir is actually a grand tour of twentieth-century history through the eyes of Marina von Neumann Whitman. Whitman is the daughter of John von Neumann, a Hungarian émigré who made key contributions to the Manhattan Project as well as to mathematics and the fledgling efforts in computer science during the formative years of the modern U.S. science establishment. From her unique position, she recounts a series of events from the 1920s to the present, a period of significant scientific, technological, and social change.

The Prologue opens with Marina at her father’s bedside, as he lay dying of cancer in 1956. It is a familiarly tragic scene made surreal by the presence of her father’s military minders. They are charged with ensuring that he reveals no national secrets while under the influence of chemotherapy drugs and painkillers. The encounter sets a pattern for Marina’s life experiences as ordinary on one level and simultaneously extraordinary on another.
The early chapters tell the story of her parents’ meeting in pre-World War I Hungary and their later emigration from 1930s Berlin during the Nazi government’s rise. Their ticket out is von Neumann’s 1933 appointment as one of the five founding faculty members (along with Albert Einstein) of the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS) at Princeton University. He and his wife settle in Princeton, and Marina is born shortly thereafter. From there, von Neumann and a group of fellow Hungarian ex-patriots, collectively known as ‘the Martians,’ go on to make significant scientific and technological contributions to the coming war effort.

The von Neumann marriage is short-lived—Marina’s parents divorce when she is two years old. However, the split is quite amicable, and they take the unusually progressive step of deciding upon joint custody. They agree that Marina will live with her mother until the age of twelve. Thereafter, she will live with her father until ready for college. Thus, she spends her formative years under the tutelage of her mother, a would-be socialite who alternately sets the local social calendar and teaches young Rosie-the-Riveters to assemble radar sets during the War.

Marina’s teenage years begin in the late 1940s, during the post-war boom. Her father’s status among the U.S. scientific elite has been cemented following his work on the Manhattan Project and his development of game theory. In his lofty academic circle Marina meets a Who’s Who of prominent scientists and begins to consider life beyond normal options for the mid-century woman.

Marina attends Radcliffe College, where she majors in government and meets her future husband, Robert Whitman, a Ph.D. student and English instructor at neighboring Harvard University. Over her father’s objection, she and Robert marry and begin their lives as faculty and wife at Princeton. Soon after, Marina applies to the graduate economics program at Princeton, only to be declined by the institution, which responded that it had no facilities (i.e., bathrooms) for women. Undaunted, she instead enters the program at Columbia University and later graduates with a Ph.D. in economics in 1962.

At this point Marina enters truly uncharted territory for the mid-century American woman. She accepts a series of positions that take her to the heights of the Nixon Administration, as well as to the executive suite of General Motors (as the first female executive in the automobile industry) and to the boardrooms of several Fortune 500 corporations. In each instance she faces the challenge of being the first woman. With intelligence, perseverance, and unwavering support from her life partner, she overcomes (nearly) every obstacle.
In a poignant ending, the book closes with Marina contemplating her life following the death of her mother.

**Evaluation**

The author has taken an already-remarkable life story and turned it into an appealing and accessible piece of writing. There are occasional, unsettling changes in tone, as when she recounts her daughter’s handling of a college roommate’s crisis, but overall the book is even-toned and engaging. At times it also has a “Forrest Gump” feel, where the main character is curiously center-stage (and on the right side of history) for all of the major historical events of the period. However, this is more a structural aspect of memoir as a form than any self-aggrandizement on the author’s part. Throughout she conveys genuine experience and authentic emotion about the events she recounts. Her accomplishments are earned and her experiences are shared, warts and all.

**What Does It Mean for Research Administration?**

For students of sponsored program administration, the book provides interesting anecdotes about the origins of the occupation. Readers get a glimpse of the formation of the research administrator role in the post-war period as a prototypical jack-of-all-trades supporting researchers. This role is embodied in the experiences of the author’s own mother, the “first” administrator at the then newly-formed Brookhaven National Laboratory. Whitman also recounts the evolution of “science”, when it got “big” and moved beyond the university classroom and laboratory to take a place at the forefront of national defense. Lastly, this memoir highlights the increasing intersection of the academic, military, government, and corporate spheres, a trend that continues today.

This story is also useful on a more practical level. Research Administration has long been an occupation that welcomes women at all levels, but there is still room for improvement at the upper ranks. According to Shambrook et al. (2011), women make up 80% of those employed in research administration across all levels. However, where earnings for one in two men are at the highest salary levels, only about one in three women earn similar amounts. The authors themselves recommend further research into this disparity. For those aspiring to higher positions, the author’s experiences are case studies of the challenges for the “first up the ladder.” Her successes (and failures) demonstrate the value in taking risks and being adaptable to different organizational environments. The recent announcements that GM has appointed the first female CEO in the automobile industry (Trop, 2013) and that findings from a Pew Research Center survey show that young women now earn
$0.93 for every dollar earned by a man (Pew Research Center, 2013) offer timely evidence of the author’s contributions as trailblazer.

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**LITERATURE CITED**


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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Andre L. Walker, M.B.A., C.R.A., is a Grants and Contracts Manager in University Research Administration, the central sponsored programs office of The University of Chicago. A dedicated NCURA volunteer, he recently concluded a term as Contributing Editor for the Biomedical column in *NCURA Magazine*. He is currently a student in the Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences (MAPSS) at The University of Chicago, where he is concentrating in sociology. He plans to write a thesis on the emergence of research administration as a recognized organizational function at the University.