

Book Party of 2

What do a master's thesis, 13 years, and a memoir have in common?

By Rhea Becker

When poet and author Richard Hoffman came to Emerson to teach in the fall of 2001, he was thrilled at the prospect of advising graduate students.

At the same time, Emerson graduate student Alexis Rizzuto was immersed in her master's thesis in the Department of Writing, Literature and Publishing. But there was a hitch.

"My thesis advisor was leaving Emerson and I didn't know anyone else. Richard Hoffman, the incoming writer-in-residence, was recommended to me. I had never taken a class with him. I had never met him." The flummoxed Rizzuto approached Hoffman and asked him to serve as her advisor. "What I came to know as typical of Richard's generosity, he immediately said, 'Sure, I'll take you on.'"

Rizzuto's thesis—a collection of nonfiction essays—quickly became the basis for a "very collegial, very friendly" working relationship, recalled Hoffman, who today is senior writer-in-residence at the College. At meetings over coffee at a local Starbucks, the pair discussed and refined the work and became "fast friends."

With MFA in hand, Rizzuto went off to teach, and later to work at a literary agency. A year or so later, she and her faculty mentor encountered each other one day at a local literary event. Hoffman asked Rizzuto for some help with an issue he was having with a previously published memoir.

Rizzuto was now senior editor at the prestigious Boston-based Beacon Press. Soon, the two began discussing a new memoir that Hoffman had been burning to write. Rizzuto admits today that she was "intimidated. Who am I to edit Richard Hoffman, who is obviously a master of creative nonfiction? I felt so much responsibility to do the best job I could because I cared so much about the book."

They dove in, first working on a proposal to submit to Beacon. "I felt from the beginning this was our book," said Hoffman. The pair's working relationship "was rooted in the trust and ease we have with each other," he added. Rizzuto quickly discovered that the editing process felt "very natural."

Their work spanned five years. "There were times I lost confidence," said Hoffman. "I didn't know how to make the story coherent. I remember panicked phone calls to Alexis."

The fruit of their labor—Hoffman's memoir, *Love & Fury*—was published in summer 2014 to positive reviews and was named a finalist for the 2014 New England Book Award in Nonfiction. The book, which examines Hoffman's lifelong struggle to know his father, was also an opportunity to "write about boyhood, the socialization of boys, and the misogyny inherent in how boys are raised."

Andre Dubus III (*House of Sand and Fog*) called *Love & Fury* "a rare combination of honest self-scrutiny, fairness, intellectual rigor, and emotional bravery. With a poet's ear and a short story writer's eye, this fine memoir will move you the way all great literature does." Dorothy Allison, author of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, called the memoir "an unsparing examination of just how resilient family can be."

Rizzuto admitted that one of her favorite lines in *Love & Fury* is "the nicest acknowledgement I've ever gotten" from an author. **FB**

"When I have spoken of my family in the past, there is always someone who wants to know how such love and fury could coexist, and I don't understand the question. Families seem to me to be *made of* love & fury.

The world is mostly water; we are mostly water; life itself is mostly water, but we don't ask how such hydrogen and oxygen can coexist. We just drink it and live."

Richard Hoffman

"Masterful and necessary... This fine memoir will move you the way all great literature does—it will wake you up, it will make you see, it may even change how you live this one life you've been given."

—Andre Dubus III, author of *Townie: A Memoir*

Hoffman and Rizzuto at Beacon Press in Boston

