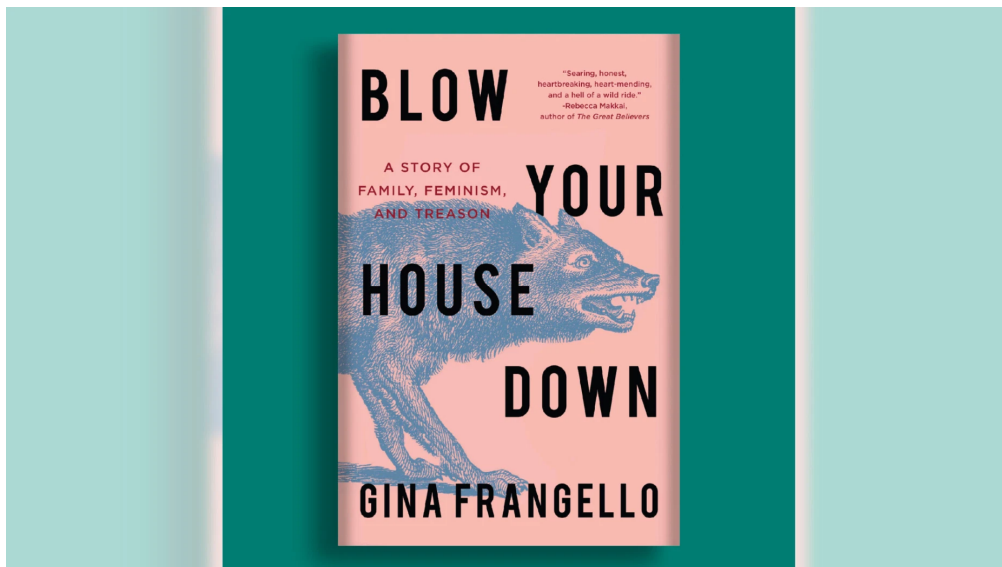


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Two recent memoirs about adultery spark interest – and controversy



Gina Frangello's recent memoir "Blow Your House Down" (Counterpoint Press) has provoked much discussion since its release in April.

By **SANDRA TSING LOH** |

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It's summer. You're lounging by the pool, sunblock on, a pile of reading to your side. Quick question: Which book do you pick up first?

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A woman upends her life with a shocking midlife affair, blowing up her family (and yes, of course, there are children involved).

If the latter plotline tempts you more, consider two scandalous new memoirs by Southern California female writers. Anna Karenina famously paid for her sins by jumping under a train. By contrast, these two authoresses have lived to tell the tale – shocking some readers, but mesmerizing, even healing, others.

Gina Frangello's "[Blow Your House Down: A Story of Family, Feminism, and Treason](#)" opens with guns blazing. In a callback to "The Story of O," "The Story of A" begins: "A is for Adulteress. But you knew that. There is virtually no history of literature without the Adulteress. ... Emma Bovary ... Hester Prynne, Daisy Buchanan ... Agent of Ruin. Woman." Of course, Frangello notes, A also is for Author, Age, Anger and Atonement – themes that resonate here as strongly. Which is to say this is no tropical romance novel; the story is unapologetically messy.

In "Blow Your House Down," Frangello cares for her inelegantly aging parents, fights with her husband, lies to her adopted children (not always, but one panicked false assurance that the affair had ended haunts). Over a period of seven (!) years, Frangello seesaws back and forth with her lover, who alternates sucking rapturously on the heel of her cowboy boot with bouts of depression (he is a recovering heroin addict). He also is of course married – to a woman stricken, horribly, with cancer. Then Frangello also gets cancer. She has a double mastectomy; fiercely, she and her lover continue having sex.

"Art cannot save anybody from anything," is a Gilbert Sorrentino quote Frangello cites – and, in the end, disagrees with. Indeed, she passionately ups the ante: "If I believe that art can, in fact, save us, over and over again, then does it follow that I risk the audacity of believing that you might be the very one who needs my words to save your life?"

In the case of writer Dani Shapiro (author of the family memoir "Inheritance"), the answer was no. In her acidly negative New York Times critique of Frangello's book, which begins "Pity the poor memoirist," Shapiro admits she "tried to wriggle out" of writing the review, because it had so "gotten under my skin." While confessing to scribbling notes like *OMG* and *stop* and *no!!* in the margins, Shapiro also notes: "All too often, it's the life that is judged and reviewed, not the literary merits of the work."

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Shapiro's cool artistic dismissal drew howls of indignation amongst other women writers, particularly within the Facebook community Binders of Women (the name being an ironic callback to Mitt Romney), a behemoth of influence in writerly circles. It's true that Frangello's writing style is less measured than incantatory. Her thoughts can flow on in torrents. The chronology can jump around: one image in real time will remind Frangello of both a past and future moment, sometimes all in the same sentence.

On the other hand, with "A is for Adulteress," Frangello isn't offering herself as particularly reliable, coherent or even a ready-for-primetime expert on memoir writing. (This is opposed to Shapiro, who calmly cites essayist Vivian Gornick and "the greatest no-nos in writing about the self.")

In her scuffed, extramarital lover-licked cowboy boots, Frangello presents herself as wreckage. Indeed, one of her writerly touchstones is the late Los Angeles-based writer Kate Braverman. Making no apologies in life or literature, in the 1980s classic of LA lit, "Lithium for Medea," Braverman describes her female protagonist's cocaine use and other bad behaviors (OMG and stop and no!!) (*ITALICS* for OMG, stop and no!!) in fevered, dreamlike prose. Some readers find the book confusing, others uniquely illuminating. (It depends on your literary taste: Is bougainvillea a sunlit, surreal kind of Los Angeles cancer ... or is it just a plant?)

So, aging adulteress authors? The question on the table is: Witches or not? Should they be burnt, lauded ... or just have their sentences painstakingly spliced?

Coming soon is Erika Schickel's "[The Big Hurt](#)." Schickel grew up in 1970s Manhattan, daughter of the Time magazine film critic Richard Schickel and the lesser-known – and this is part of the tale – writer Julia Whedon.

Erika Schickel describes growing up both privileged yet oddly unsupervised; in a time of avowed sexual liberation, parents themselves partner-swapped, and didn't blink if an (appropriately hip) 30-year-old man came to the door to pick up a 16-year-old girl. At boarding school, Schickel had a thrilling quasi-idealistic (two artists together!) affair with a married music teacher, resulting, suddenly and shockingly, in a shameful expulsion.

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Schickel moves to Los Angeles to leave the past behind and to remake herself, as an artist, wife – and not just devoted mother of two, an exemplary member of the PTA. But the past continues to weigh on her. She keeps trying to write her boarding school story as a funny bad girl story, but is perennially stuck. At the Los Angeles Festival of Books, amongst the free Cokes and buffet, she meets LA's most famous noir writer (pseudonym-ed Sam Spade, but Googling five minutes will yield the name).

She and Spade strike up a relationship, first based on missives ostensibly on the craft of writing. But high emotions are also key. For Spade, a looming figure is Beethoven; he believes that Schickel, who is 25 years younger and resembles his famously murdered mother, is his pre-destined lover. (Later he insists that, though his wealth will go to his ex-wife, he and Schickel must be forever entombed together after death.)

In Schickel's telling, at first it's a heady cocktail for a middle-aged hausfrau in plastic Crocs. However, in the process of the increasingly sordid affair, painful family breakup and, as always, trying to write, she begins to unwind the legacy of her own mother.

Schickel sees she's in a third generation of creative but trapped women always making space – psychological, at times sexual – for charismatic, larger-than-life, emotionally needy male artists.

I would tell you how “The Big Hurt” turns out, but why spoil the pathos? The point is, regardless of your personal taste, for stories surreal or sedate, for prose ordered or wild, the pleasures of reading involve going wherever the journey takes you.

Even if your secret passion happens to be singing, drawing and Marie Kondo-ing those sock drawers? We won't tell. Whatever books you're diving into this summer, no one will throw you under a train.

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Sandra Tsing Loh

Sandra Tsing Loh is a commentator, performer and author of numerous books including "The Mad Woman and the Roomba." Follow her on Twitter @SandraTsingLoh.

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