
One of the most controversial and, at the same time, revealing memoirs published in 2020 is Mary L. Trump’s family memoir, Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World’s Most Dangerous Man. Mary Trump, who is Donald Trump’s niece and the daughter of the older Trump son Fred and her mother Linda, is a trained clinical psychologist and holds a Ph.D. from the Denver Institute of Advanced Psychological Studies. Not only is Mary Trump the only niece Donald Trump has, but also the only family member who dares speak out in public. The reason for her coming out about the Trump empire in general, and Donald Trump in particular, was, as she maintains, Donald Trump’s 2016 candidacy for president of the United States and the danger this posed, and still poses, for the country. As she claims, “Donald, following the lead of my grandfather and with the complicity, silence, and inaction of his siblings, destroyed my father. I can’t let him destroy my country” (17).

This radical statement contains a number of issues that shape and inform Mary Trump’s auto/biography. It is about the founder of the Trump enterprise in real estate, Fred, Sr., of German ancestry, and his power over his five children—Fred, Jr., Maryanne, Elizabeth, Donald, and Robert—and their wives and offspring. This private life has been as much about psychological pressure on every single family member as it has been about economic and political success. The intricate entanglement of the private and public spheres and the more recent developments with Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement have finally triggered the motivation to destroy Donald Trump’s façade of success. As she explains, “now the stakes are far higher than they’ve ever been before; they are literally life and death. Unlike any previous time in his life, Donald’s failings cannot be hidden or ignored because they threaten us all. […] The events of the last three years, however, have forced my hand, and I can no longer remain silent. By the time this book is published, hundreds of thousands of American lives will have been sacrificed on the altar of Donald’s hubris and willful ignorance. If he is afforded a second term, it would be the end of American democracy” (16-17).

This severe criticism is based on Mary Trump’s own childhood and adult experiences in “The House,” as she calls the Trump home in Queens, her training and observations as a psychologist, and her insight into and knowledge of major legal documents of the many court trials she has seen unfold, some of which she has been personally involved in. Her personal stance is as much an advantage as it is a disadvantage. Her father, Fred, Jr., was never able to live up to his own father’s expectations—who himself had become the head of the house and, with his mother, of E. Trump and Son when his own German-speaking father Frederick had died of the Spanish flu. From the 1910s onward, family tradition—as also visible with names that are mostly variations of Fred(eric), Mary, Elizabeth, and only later Donald and Robert—has been a significant factor in how its members have been treated. Fred, Sr., and his wife Mary, with Scottish ancestry, raised their children with a clear eye on economic success, to be reached through “kowtowing to more powerful and better-connected men” (34) and hard work. “Financial worth” (38) did become “the same as self-worth, monetary value was human value” (38). The author’s own father, Fred, Jr., could not realize his own plans for his future, and the knowledge that he was vulnerable and not a great achiever—even when he flew commercial planes as a
pilot, which his father called a “‘bus driver in the sky’” (62)—led him to drinking, which, ultimately speeded up the downward spiral. Living in a run-down apartment in one of his father’s poorly built apartment buildings, a subsequent divorce, and being deprived of any money that would have been rightfully his, he died in 1981 at the age of 42 without adequate medical care. This event and the loss of a law suit in its aftermath against the Trump family render the memoir highly personal and subjective. Yet, who could be objective when depicting Donald Trump and his behavior?

Mary Trump voices strong criticism. Donald Trump, according to her, cultivated a “delusional belief in his own brilliance and superiority” (101); she describes him as “a savant of self-promotion, shameless liar, marketeer, and builder of brands” (103), as a “monster [that] had been set free” (103), as someone who has not made any money himself but simply borrowed it, mostly from his father and the banks. She depicts his casino failures and him blaming others, his attempts at stealing money from his siblings, and his womanizing activities. Once hired to ghostwrite a book for her uncle, Mary Trump did not succeed because he simply had nothing to say and was unable to distinguish between fact and his own fictions. After the death of her grandfather in 1999, she learned that she and her brother did not inherit anything although they should have received part of their father’s share. When they went to court, the family threatened to take away their substantial medical insurance. About a decade later, on the occasion of Trump’s election, Mary Trump began to collect material and worked together with the *New York Times* to make public some of Trump’s activities she considers shameless. For her, Donald Trump has remained a three-year-old who is “incapable of growing, learning, or evolving, unable to regulate his emotions, moderate his responses, or take in and synthesize information” (197). According to his psychologically savvy niece, Trump’s actions are triggered by fear, that is, the fear of not living up to his “long-dead father’s” expectations (202). Mary Trump reads him as an essentially weak character, “a terrified little boy” (210) with the desperate need for “toxic positivity” (211) that utterly lacks human empathy.

The book affirms what most readers expect, namely the image of Donald Trump as utterly incapable of running a country, of managing any form of business. As a “narcissist” (12), his sociopathy and pathologies are highly complex, as the author writes, and would need a much more “accurate and comprehensive diagnosis” (13). She does offer one by showing Donald Trump’s dependence on his father and the perpetuation of a devastating family life that seems to have entered the national political level. Mary Trump is the only Trump sibling who is willing to tell the destructive story of “the most visible and powerful family in the world” (17). Donald Trump’s relationship to his father does seem to explain much of his behavior, but we might ask whether this view takes away his own responsibility. It actually turns him into a determined product of Fred, Sr. Mary Trump does not ask for empathy for her uncle; she asks readers, and her country people, to open their eyes to what Donald Trump really is and to not give him a second chance to further destroy the United States and kill its people. Yes, it is a subjective memoir, but, no, it does not lack credibility and should be read by all Americans and everyone who has any say in the fate of the U.S. nation.

CARMEN BIRKLE (Philipps-Universität Marburg)