

Words & ideas by Mark Morelli

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REVIEW

Review: *Leaving Home* by Art Buchwald

by Mark Morelli, *Cleveland Free Times*, 1996

Art Buchwald is well known to America through his satirical newspaper column. In *Leaving Home*, he taps into a subject thus far unexamined: his own bittersweet life.

Buchwald's column is genial, occasionally sharp. So is *Leaving Home*, which examines his early life in foster homes, the Marines, and his postwar early adulthood in California and Paris.

Buchwald grew up in the colorful New York City of the '30s and '40s, a place where he wandered safely and learned about life. His mother was in a mental hospital. His father, unlucky in business, was too busy barely surviving and placed his four children in foster care. In lieu of a normal childhood, Buchwald made up fanciful stories about he had been kidnapped from France by a wicked nanny. A lonely and terribly confused tot, he claims that at a young age he said, "This stinks. I'm going to become a humorist," and from that moment on dedicated himself to creating laughter from sadness.

Which explains why this memoir didn't emerge before. "I only became introspective about what was going on when I was writing this book," Buchwald states. But don't worry, it's not unctuous. Had he been born twenty years later, this might be a Freudian sob story. Buchwald suffered two major bouts of adult depression. but Buchwald, without candifying his forlorn youth, is kind. He's genuinely simple, with a childlike prose style like Kurt Vonnegut's. He's not urbane like Russell Baker, nor does he plumb psychological depths like Tobias Wolff, other recent memoirists.

A few years ago, *Spy* magazine did a vicious number on Buchwald, whose gentler satire is a sitting duck for such cynics and pleased-with-themselves poseurs. Buchwald is part of the GI Generation, shaped by the Depression and war. They sacrificed too much for

America to want to desecrate it. Of extremists, left and right, he writes, "I was prepared to fight to the death for their right to believe what they did, but I secretly prayed they would all wind up with syphilis."

Buchwald considers himself "a child of Franklin Roosevelt," who sympathizes with the poor and minorities. On being housed by the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, he writes: "I guess there is a certain pride in being in an institution that even George Bush couldn't get into." He has used humor, not merely to make a living, but to survive a tale of being foisted on to those who didn't always welcome him. His story is admirable and humbly told.