

Opa Nobody

reviewed by [Valerie Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [May 6, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Opa Nobody

Sonya Huber

University of Nebraska Press

Writing family history is a notoriously fraught enterprise. The reputations of the dead, the memories of the living and the artifacts that threaten both combine to

make it a problematic literary task that most writers avoid—or else disguise in fiction.

Sonya Huber's book of creative nonfiction, *Opa Nobody*, tracks an innovative course through this thorny landscape. In what she says could best be called a "nonfiction novel," Huber traces her German grandfather's resistance to and, at times, complicity with the Nazi regime. Rather than setting documents, histories and photographs in opposition to family lore, however, Huber plumbs family stories for the truths they hold, even if they ultimately prove not to be factual. "Remembering is an act of the imagination," poet W. S. Di Piero has written, and it is precisely Huber's play with the imaginative possibilities in the gaps between historical fact and family memory that makes her project so poetic and moving.

Huber's maternal grandfather, Heina Buschmann, was a leader in socialist politics during the rise of the Nazis and through World War II; his father, Huber's great-grandfather, had been a miner and labor leader; and Huber's grandmother and great-grandmother were political activists in their own right. A resister who smuggled anti-Nazi pamphlets around the countryside on his bicycle, Heina was dismissed as a nobody in family stories because his political agenda appeared to cancel out any sense of duty in the domestic sphere.

When Huber was writing the book, her mother told her, "I want to read what you're writing, because I want to understand him better"—she was looking for the answer to what made her father simultaneously so courageous in public life and so clueless at home. Huber writes: "I wanted to fill up that need, the need I grew up with, Heina's absence as a presence, one layer of Mom's massive well of hurt. I hoped it was a book-shaped hole but knew it was much larger."

While Huber's book may not assuage her mother's resentment, it will most assuredly satisfy readers' desire for a narrative that is equal parts political and personal, historical and contemporary. Huber superimposes her own story of leftist political activism on her grandfather's, using ligatures like pamphleteering, rage, hope, politics-fueled romance, and organizing meetings to hook her narrative onto his. But their stories follow different trajectories. While a sense of foreboding unfurls with the grandparents' story—no one needs foreshadowing to know where the slow creep of fascism will lead—Huber's own journey is marked by movement through crisis and toward eventual redemption.

We meet Huber first in a midwestern town in the 1980s, when she thinks she is the only child in the U.S. worried about nuclear weapons, then we watch her become an anarchist youth who joins cause after cause and drops out of college because of panic attacks. She writes of cutting herself in the bathroom of a political youth project office, despairing about a movement that is failing and feeling guilty for not being able to halt its demise, then falling into self-protective paralysis in the wake of 9/11: “I knew I could stand at a peace vigil holding a candle until my hands were flecked with burns from dripping wax, and it would not make a shred of difference.”

Huber then submerges her own story for a time while she narrates the havoc and terror of 1944. In the chaos of Hitler’s unraveling reign, Heina worked as a medic in the German army on the eastern front while his wife and children fled nearly 200 miles on bicycle, one of the children dying en route in what would become East Germany. The end of the war brought little in the way of resolution for Heina; he returned from Russia emotionally shattered only to learn of his daughter’s death, then swiftly became absorbed in the endless rebuilding of postwar socialism. After his wife died—possibly because he didn’t call for a doctor—he married the new housekeeper, and his legacy of obliviousness to the family hardened even further.

Huber’s own narrative resurfaces toward the end of the book, and she concludes with a scene that sets her activism apart from her grandfather’s lopsided political passions. On the way home from an interview for a labor organizing position, Huber decides to turn down the job because the supervisor had told her that it was “probably about three full-time jobs” and because she can’t see making it work alongside of caring for her infant. A voice in her head gives her permission to say no to the job, a voice she identifies as her grandfather’s: “Heina had little compassion for himself, but he would look at me with aching eyes and want, for me, moments of rest,” Huber writes. “So that’s what I have, for right now, a sinking sense that even though my gut wants the rush of a fight, I can’t lay down my baby boy for this job, for this good cause.”

Despite Huber’s movement toward wholeness, some readers will find themselves wanting more by way of an answer to the question posed in the first line of the book, “Why try to change the world?” Her grandfather’s answers are implicit—because you long for the revolution, because your children are hungry, because you want to please your long-dead father—but in the end we are left with little convincing rationale for why we should even try. The Buschmann activists are committed to social justice but not to religious faith—“Bread is my religion,” Huber’s mother says

at one point, and Heina found spiritual respite in walks in the forest. Through her admirably candid writing, Huber makes visible the inability of political activism to manage failure and despair. Activism “is a theology of second chances,” she writes, “but in place of a wise and benevolent god you have only your fellow humans with their limitless capacity to work or to betray, to win or to fear.”

On the first page of the book Huber challenges her remembered grandfather: “Tell me how to live without fear.” It would be too simple to say that Huber should have looked to God instead of her grandfather for the answer. Yet I found myself aching for the activists, past and present, in Huber’s book. They work themselves to the point of collapse with no hope beyond the occasional consolations of change in the material world. Bread may feed for a time, and trees provide some solace, but rarely does either satisfy our deepest hungers. Of course, like activism, faith ultimately leads to the inscrutable, and religiously motivated activists are also frequently left with more uncertainty and anguish than when we began.

“Have you figured out why he was like that?” Huber’s mother asked her as she neared the end of her project, “Why he believed politics was more important than his family?” Huber’s research had led her to no satisfactory answer, and her own experience of trying to merge activism with motherhood only complicated the question. “I wanted to say: see him as more complex than evil,” Huber writes. “Know the good that he did. But none of the reasons sounded believable or satisfying, not compared to the need of a living baby now or a living child then.”