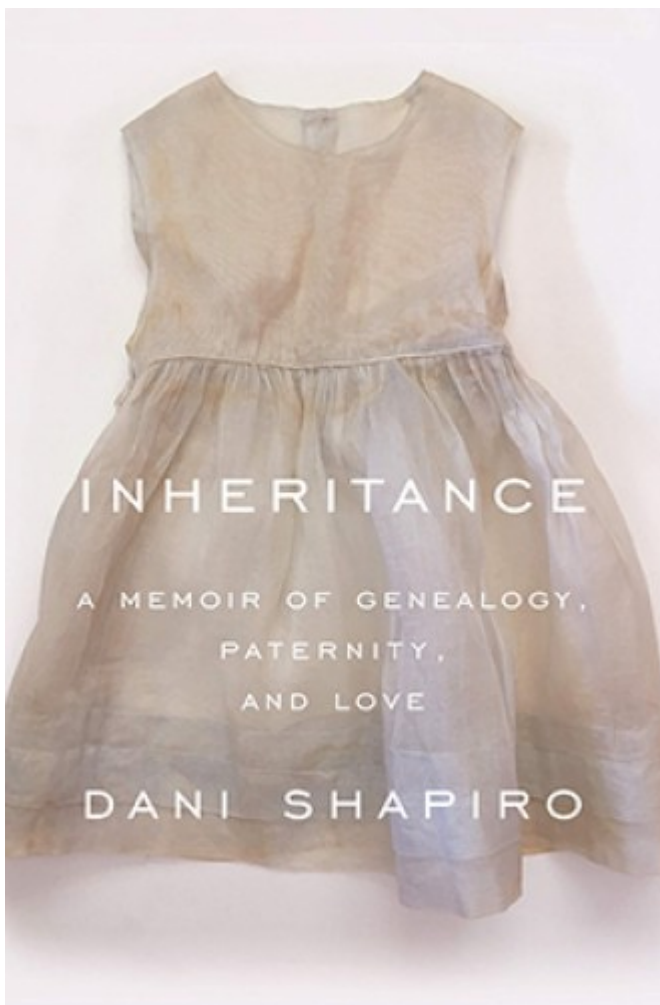


A DNA test and its aftermath

Even as a child, Dani Shapiro wondered whether she belonged in her family.

by [Arianne Braithwaite Lehn](#) in the [June 5, 2019](#) issue

In Review



Inheritance

A Memoir of Genealogy, Paternity, and Love

By Dani Shapiro
Knopf

Sometimes it's the nonchalant decisions, the choices you make on a whim, that most upend your life. Like sending off saliva in a DNA genealogy kit when your spouse takes an interest in ancestry. For Dani Shapiro, the results of this decision led to uncovering the biggest secret of her life. At 54 years old, she learned that the father she'd adored all her life was not her biological father.

The author of three best-selling memoirs and five novels, Shapiro has consistently delved deeply into human relationships. In this new memoir, she plumbs these depths with even greater fervor. A flash scene at the book's start shows Shapiro as a little girl gazing in the mirror, then immediately moves to the present in a San Francisco hotel, the news of her DNA analysis searing and fresh. The rest of the book relates her unraveling of secrets, including the identity of her biological father and the role of experimental sperm donation in her conception. "All my life I had known there was a secret," she writes. "What I hadn't known: the secret was me."

As she narrates her heartbreaking story, Shapiro faces significant questions about identity: Who am I? What (or who) makes me who I am? She also raises underlying questions about medical ethics and technological advances.

Shapiro writes with curiosity and candor, giving readers the opportunity to grow alongside her while she wrestles. We enter into her emotional landscape of shock, anxiety, sorrow, and chaos. We understand at new levels the ramifications of trauma. We meet a variety of people who help her put together her puzzle—some of whom are themselves pieces of the puzzle. Shapiro conducts research with the skill of a detective even as she stays attuned to her heart's handling of each discovery.

Though Shapiro regularly vacillates between the present and the past, a graceful flow reinforces the overall narrative. Also unifying to the book is her Jewish faith, particularly memories of her father's devotion. Hebrew phrases, practices, and references help hold the story together. With generational family photos filling rooms in her house and love for her father filling her heart, she grew up knowing that being a Shapiro—particularly the daughter of Paul Shapiro—was central to who she was.

While I was reading, I couldn't help but recall my own experience growing up a cradle Presbyterian at the church where my great-grandparents had been members.

Our whole family comprised the “Braithwaite pew.” I can imagine how rattled I would feel if those ties—biological and spiritual intertwined—were questioned.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Shapiro’s story is the premonition she’d experienced all her life of being other. This “interior ache,” she writes, led her to snoop through her parents’ rooms and regularly walk through her neighborhood imagining life as part of a different family. On some level she knew she came from somewhere else, her body sensing what her mind hadn’t yet learned.

With potent clarity, Shapiro recounts past experiences that suddenly hold new meaning and inflict fresh pain. She remembers one night overhearing her mother mention to a friend, “Oh, my daughter was conceived in Philadelphia . . . it’s not a pretty story.”

She also recalls people questioning her Jewish identity, from childhood through her college years. Blonde and blue-eyed, Shapiro looked very different from the rest of her family. Repeatedly, people would assert in jest or disbelief that she couldn’t be who she thought she was. On one disturbing afternoon at Jared Kushner’s grandparents’ home, his grandmother pulled little Dani aside and told her that with an appearance like hers, she could have “stolen bread from the Nazis” for them. Shapiro holds memories like these in the light, asking what they mean now.

Inheritance speaks powerfully about what constitutes our true essence. There’s biology, history, and what we’ve done, known, or held—but there’s also “the true self” that’s been planted within us. There’s the question of what’s in our blood, but also what’s in our hearts. Getting to the deepest level of self is one of the compelling invitations this book makes. Shapiro illumines how freedom within the true self means accepting, even living, the paradoxes surrounding it. “I was not who I thought I had been. But I was who I had always been,” she writes. As a parent, she looks at her “beautiful [son], who wouldn’t exist if everything hadn’t happened just as it did.”

Perhaps my favorite part of the book is when she shares her familial discovery with a rabbi friend. “You can say, ‘This is impossible, terrible,’” he tells her. “Or you can say, ‘This is beautiful, wonderful.’ You can imagine that you’re in exile. Or you can imagine that you have more than one home.” Shapiro’s journey to name home in more than one place reflects the internal paradox faced by all people of faith. We are made of heaven and we are made of earth. The work of faith is to merge these worlds and realities, embracing them as unified rather than hierarchical.

As she opens herself to new ways of understanding herself and the world, Shapiro also teaches us about release. Her drive for certainty—or the illusion of it—progressively falls away. Shapiro begins her search ravenous for answers, but what she longs to discover changes as the book progresses. She reaches a place of freedom as she realizes that certainty is no longer desirable. She finds she doesn't need to hear the things she'd thought she needed to hear to be OK. She reminds us that while "we can never know what lies at the end of the path not taken," we can offer ourselves to the here and now with gratitude and trust, finding ourselves at home.