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## Author revisits Schroon childhood

Gelb's memoirs painfully honest story of different lives under same roof

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“Just because it happened to you doesn't make it interesting” is what we warn people who write memoirs.

Unfortunately, the maxim is often ignored, and many people have written very bad books after reading Frank McCourt's excellent “Angela's Ashes.”

But “Schroon Lake,” by Lueza Thirkield Gelb is a memoir worth reading.

Lueza Thirkield was born in New Jersey in 1931, but her story begins more than 50 years later when she and her brother, Dwight, return to their childhood home in Schroon Lake.

There they will bury their mother's ashes, as well as prepare the house and its contents for auction.

Opening the door to her childhood home and sorting through the drawers and cabinets, the author also sifts the memories she has of the people and the place — her family, friends and a long-ago Schroon Lake.

The Thirkield children first spent their summers in Schroon Lake because their mother's family (Mary Alma and Arthur Harris) owned a large home there.

Later, after living in New Jersey, San Antonio and Brooklyn, the family lived year-round in Schroon, with the author living there from 1938 until she married Bruce Gelb in 1953.

In the memories that caused Gelb to begin the book, childhood at Schroon Lake was full of “idyllic physical beauty and unending imaginative possibility.”

But this is not a book about wonderful people living in a wonderful place.

Instead, it's a wonderful book about conflicted people whose lives give us a window into a different time, a different place, and maybe most families.

The different role of memory in the lives of children who grew up in the same circumstances is evidenced in how Lueza and Dwight approach

## SCHROON LAKE



Lueza Thirkield Gelb

The cover of “Schroon Lake” by Lueza Thirkield Gelb.

the contents of the house they have to empty and sell. Lueza sorts carefully, gets distracted, an object sparking a memory that veins off to another memory.

Dwight, who has flown his own plane from Michigan to the Adirondacks, is ready to throw everything away.

The sooner he can jettison the remnants of his childhood, the sooner he can close the door on the family home one last time. The sooner he can fly away, the happier he will be.

Their conversations about their childhood, and especially Dwight's reluctance to discuss it at all, show why the author says “I've thought we each had a dif-

ferent set of parents.”

Lueza's memory of her parents includes a lot of complexity, but Dwight's is painfully simple. Of his father, “And he hit me again on the same side. And told me how bad I was. And he hit me on the other side back-handed. And he cursed me. And he hit me. And he hit me. And he hit me.” Of his mother, “Mother knew, how could she not have known, and she didn't help me.”

Schroon, however, is not just the painfully honest story of very different lives lived under the same roof. Gelb has also traced the lives of her parents before they met and married. She provides insights into a young wom-

an's life at Oberlin College, a young man's employment, and their courtship.

The book is complex, moving back and forth between the present and the past, describing days in the 1940s in Schroon, conversations between Gelb's parents in Texas in the 1930s, and the lives of her older sister and younger brother.

Like all good memoirs of childhood, it reminds us of how we become adults: “We were outgrowing the age when we would conjure up adventures in our imagination. The real world was getting closer and closer.”

Some parts work less well than others. Though the time in Texas is pivotal in the family history and reminds us of the Victorian rules of conduct between husband and wife, we're there too long.

And even more time in Schroon Lake would be welcome. What we learn about the Herlihy's, a very large Irish family that lives up the road and befriends Lueza, is wonderful, but we want more.

As for Cecil's diner, where Lueza and Dwight go for dinner while sorting through the house, where the waitress offers condolences on their mother's death — what was it like when the kids were growing up? Has the menu changed, or only the prices?

More recollections about education in Schroon and clearer images of the teachers, kids and curriculum would help. What has changed, what has remained the same?

But overall, this is a fine book — candid, ruthless, mature. It's filled with compassion for complex and damaged people in a special place.

In one of her poems, Emily Dickinson talks about what we do the day after death, “The sweeping up the heart, / And putting love away.” For Gelb, that day happens when she and Dwight return to Schroon Lake to close the family home. What they find in the house and in themselves is worth reading. The author has made what happened to her interesting.

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