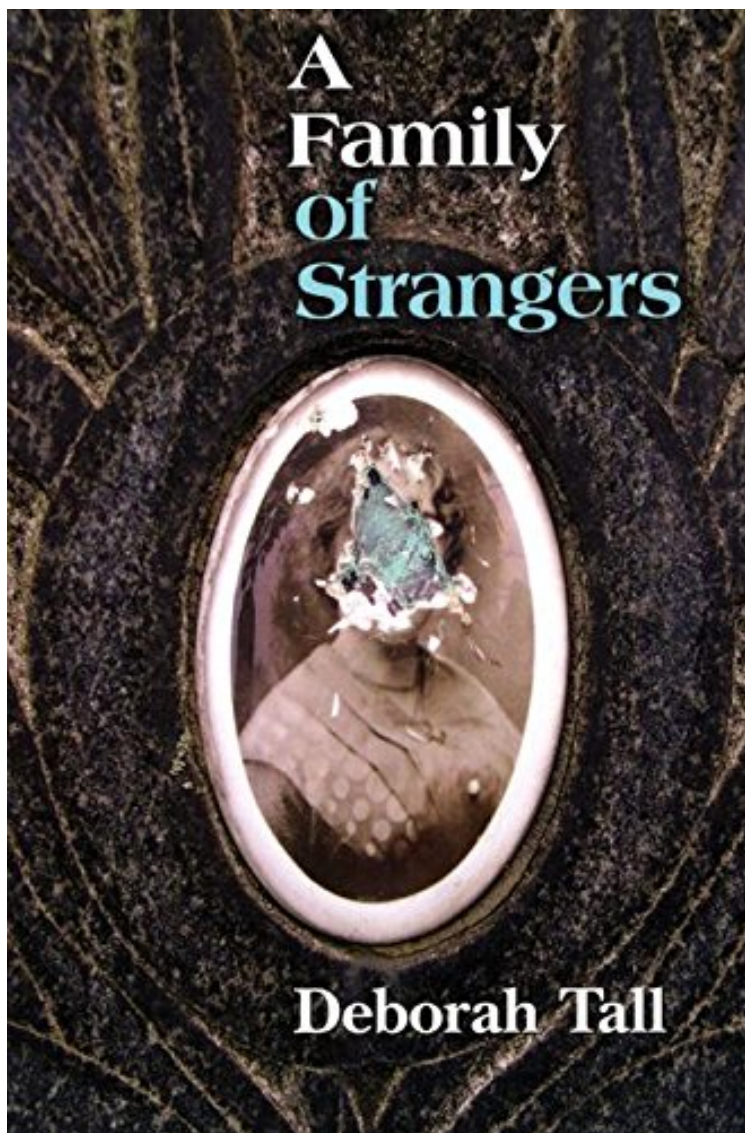


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A Family of Strangers

Deborah Tall

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Deborah Tall : A Family of Strangers before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Family of Strangers:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Secrets in FamiliesBy msfitzExcellent and intriguing memoir written as a series of lyric essays. Her juxtapositions of certain quotes with the essays is uncanny. It is readable and easy to read but also very thought provoking. Anyone interested in searching for their parents' pasts should read this book.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Experimental structure and good research made this book a page turnerBy Christine ScharfExperimental structure and good research made this book a page turner! Tall's journey to

unravel the family mysteries is also the journey to the center of her soul. Brilliant. 4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Of value as writing, poetry, a story of genealogical research, a legacy and memorial.

By Deborah Tall, a poet, teacher, editor and gifted writer of 'creative non-fiction', died, aged 55, in October 2006. She was a third generation American Jew, whose father's parents (and some other relations) were fortunate to escape Ukraine with their lives in the period of lethal pogroms during the Civil War that followed the 1917 Russian Revolution. The family name, contracted to Tall on arrival in the United States, was Talesnick. Born in New York City in 1921, her father was orphaned at the age of 13. For reasons perhaps connected with their disapproval of his mother, his remaining relatives did not take him in. Homeless and penniless, he was made a ward of the city. He was clever, recovered from the initial set-back at school, was successful in his career and, working on Cold War radar surveillance, extended to the limit his predisposition to confide nothing to anyone. Despite years of probing, when he died, aged 68, Deborah knew little of her family's origin and background, or whether she had any close relatives still alive in America or Ukraine. But she had gleaned just enough information to follow the leads she had and discover much that her father must have known but kept entirely to himself, some things that perhaps even he did not know, and a couple of things about which he had apparently lied.

In Queens, NYC, she discovers a burial ground filled with former residents of the small town in Ukraine from which her grandfather and his brother migrated, and that there are more than a few Talesnicks buried there. She discovers some still-living relations, and is delighted by their warm response to her. She learns that her father's Down's Syndrome younger brother, believed long dead, lived until 1990 in an institution that would have been easily accessible to herself and her family had they but known. And she ultimately visits Ukraine to meet a surviving relative there, to see the town from which they all came, to view the remaining houses in what had been the Jewish quarter, and to see the derelict cemetery in which generations of the town's Jews were buried, including 486 in a single mass grave on 13th September 1941.

On first opening the book, I was surprised to find that it consists entirely of short pieces that mostly extend over no more than two pages and treat with a single subject. Each piece is headed with a title such as Anatomy of Genealogy and many pages carry no more than 100 words; some just a single sentence. That the author is a poet shines through virtually every one of those short pieces, and some are entirely valid as free-form poems. I particularly like Anatomy of Silence, found on page 25: 'Silence rises around our house like a wall studded with broken glass.' Invisible radio waves patrol for intrusions. My father has expanded the perimeter of his wariness to encompass us.....' The same title heads page 53: 'Over the years, silence accumulated in my father's body like a toxin.....' If ever his pain seeped out unawares, it was invisibly absorbed by our spotless beige carpets and walls, the unblemished, regulated skin of our life, dutifully maintained by my mother. Sadly, Deborah Tall did not spend enough time in Ukraine to really get a feel for the place, or live long enough to do so through repeat visits. She visited Babi Yar on the 55th anniversary of the slaughter there of Kiev's Jews, and writes interestingly of that experience, but she misreports both the number of Jews killed and the total number of bodies buried in the ravine by war's end. She asserts that Jewish forced labor was used to disinter and burn bodies at Babi Yar as the Germans retreated from Soviet territory in 1943. The deed was done, yes, but I never before saw or heard any suggestion that Jews were involved. By that time, virtually all of central Ukraine's Jews who had not managed to flee east ahead of the Nazi invasion were long dead. Also, in the earlier stages of the book Deborah Tall irritates by repeatedly referring to 'Russia' when clearly she means Ukraine. But all those matters are peripheral. The book has value as writing, as poetry, as the story of the author's genealogical research, as a legacy to her daughters and wider family, and as a memorial to herself. Recommended.

Without self-absorption, Tall traces the self's emergence in a place which she recognized from the start as her testing place. Seamus Heaney In the literature of place, Deborah Tall's book stands out for its delicacy, range of learning, and refreshing frankness.

Phillip Lopate In her third book of nonfiction, Deborah Tall explores the genealogy of the missing. Haunted by her orphaned father's abandonment by his extended family, his secretive, walled-off trauma and absent history, she sets off in pursuit of the family he claims not to have. From the dutiful happiness of Levittown in the 1950s to a stricken former shtetl in Ukraine, we follow Tall's journey through evasions and lies. Reflecting on family secrecy, postwar American culture, and the urge for roots, Tall's search uncovers not just a missing family but an understanding of the part family and history play in identity. A Family of Strangers is Tall's life's work, told in such exacting, elegant language that the suppressed past vividly asserts its place in the present.

Deborah Tall is the author of four books of poems, most recently *Summons*, published by Sarabande Books after Charles Simic chose it for the Kathryn A. Morton Poetry Prize. She has also published two previous books of nonfiction, *The Island of the White Cow: Memories of an Irish Island* and *From Where We Stand: Recovering a Sense of Place*, and co-edited the anthology *The Poet's Notebook* with Stephen Kuusisto and David Weiss. Tall has taught writing and literature at Hobart and William Smith Colleges and edited its literary journal, *Seneca Review*, since 1982. She lives in Ithaca, New York, with her husband David Weiss and their two daughters.

From Publishers Weekly Tall, poet and editor of the *Seneca*, has long championed a form called the lyric essay, which employs the associative movement and lyrical suggestiveness of poetry while also maintaining the familiar narrative

structures and conventional organization of prose. In a singular extended work in this form, Tall (Summons) constructs a powerful account of her search for the origins of her Ukrainian Jewish family; her parents and other relatives emigrated to the U.S. around WWII and proceeded to disavow their past in an effort to overcome traumatic memories of pogroms and Nazi genocide. Throughout her upbringing, Tall's parents maintained a strict, if suspicious, silence about their relatives and lives before emigrating, leaving Tall, now a wife and mother of two daughters, desperate for information about her family history. In short chapters bearing repeated titles ("Anatomy of Secrecy," "The Dream of Family"), Tall movingly traces her genealogical quest, which leads her to the discovery of her family's pre-Ellis Island name (Talesnick), the revelation of a forgotten uncle abandoned to a mental institution and, finally, a meeting with her family's last ailing matriarch near Ladyzin, Ukraine. This deeply affecting account offers new formal avenues for memoir while providing a necessary piece of the ever-unfolding puzzle of 20th-century Jewish diaspora. (Nov.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From Booklist
Poet and poetic nonfiction writer Tall has created a family memoir at once painful and palliative. In a time of rekindled anti-Semitism, it is an act of affirmation and protest to search for hidden truths about Jewish families fractured by genocidal violence. Tall's recovery of her father's lost family history is akin in content to Dorothy Gallagher's *Strangers in the House* (2006) and Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost* (2006) but is utterly her own in its beautiful and sage distillation. Concentrating complex psychology into piercingly clear sentences in stanza-like chapters, Tall extracts the emotional truths of her postwar suburban childhood in a household ruled by silence and devoid of links to past generations. Determined to dispel the shadows of her parents' secrecy and understand her bred-in-the-bone legacy of loss, Tall finally uncovers a trail of deception wrought in the service of survival that leads to long-lost relatives in the U.S and the Ukraine. As Tall's singular insights evolve page by page in this quietly dramatic chronicle of bloodlines, she comes to understand how resistance to the brutality of the past makes the present possible, even as she knows that "memory is an ethical act." Donna Seaman Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved.

About the Author
Tall is the editor of the *Seneca* and has taught at Hobart and William Smith Colleges since 1982. Tall is the author of three previous books of poems (most recently *Summons* from Sarabande), and two books of nonfiction: *The Island of the White Cow* and *From Where We Stand*. She lives in Ithaca, New York.