"Take a lesson from me," Irwin Shaw advised William Styron. When you become a father, "dole the child out to yourself in small doses, for your career's sake."

Styron was predisposed to take this advice. "The Novel," his youngest daughter Alexandra tells us in her exquisitely written biography Reading My Father, "owned his heart." Success for Styron came early in life with Lie Down in Darkness (1951), but he remained a perfectionist, producing in his 81 years only two more novels, The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967) and Sophie's Choice (1979), each of them accompanied by "setbacks, occlusions, and long, dark nights of the soul," writes Alexandra. Although his four children, she says, "couldn't point to any good evidence to support it," they felt "loved by him and strangely compelled by his outsize need."

Reading My Father delivers a portrait of an immensely talented and troubled, agnostic and alcoholic man—and a candid, compelling account, by

When she was ten, Alexandra remembers, she looked down from her bedroom window in the family home on Martha's Vineyard to watch Frank Sinatra lather up in the outdoor shower. A few years later, on Christmas day, she and her father—tipsy, but "steadfastly jolly"—listened to Leonard Bernstein twist "Jingle Bells" into a "barnstorming Russian chastushka."

Although his four children, she says, "couldn't point to any good evidence to support it," they felt "loved by him and strangely compelled by his outsize need."

A patient, thoughtful, and generous critic of the work of other writers, Styron didn't read drafts of Alexandra's own novel-in-progress. When she phoned with the news that it had been accepted by a publisher, he declared, "That's wonderful," and hung
up abruptly.

When her father famously descended into depression and madness, Alexandra did her duty, visiting and reading to him, not so much for him "but for the good of the collective." She "felt a lot less like Cordelia in King Lear," she writes, "than like Michael Corleone in the third installment of The Godfather."

Styron took a long time to die. His daughter's account of his final days manages to capture the emotion without becoming maudlin. As she awaited the inevitable, Alexandra made peace with the father who had often ignored her. She was touched by the affection "Op-pop" showed for her son, Huck—and by the sight of the two of them, be-diapered males, sitting side-by-side, peering out the window of Massachusetts General Hospital. Alexandra was ready to read Sophie's Choice, for the first time. She was ready, as well, to caress her father's skin, and "ease his flight into the beyond."

Excerpt: 'Reading My Father'
by ALEXANDRA STYRON

One

We buried my father on a remarkably mild morning in November 2006. From our family's house on Martha's Vineyard to the small graveyard is less than a quarter mile, so we walked along the road, where, it being off-season, not a single car disturbed our quiet formation. Beneath the shade of a tall pine oak, we gathered around the grave site. Joining us were a dozen or so of my parents' closest friends. The ceremony had been planned the way we thought he'd have liked it—short on pomp, and shorter still on religion. A couple of people spoke; my father's friend Peter Matthiessen, a Zen priest, performed a simple blessing; and, as a family, we read the Emily Dickinson poem that my father had quoted at the end of his novel Sophie's Choice.

Ample make this bed.

Make this bed with awe;

In it wait till judgment break

Excellent and fair.

Be its mattress straight,

Be its pillow round;

Let no sunrise' yellow noise

Reading My Father
By Alexandra Styron
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