

# A work in progress

Taos artist Claire Haye reflects on her journey to artistic freedom

## CLAIRE HAYE/ARTIST

**Survival/Persistence/Renaissance**

By Claire Haye

2023, 189 pp.

Nearing the end of a troubled sixth-grade year in the mid-1950s at PS 166 in Manhattan, the young narrator is asked by the principal, standing disapprovingly beside her easel, "Why is your painting so ugly?" The student has no answer. Yet thinking back after a lifetime of making art, the 75-year-old author reflects how she was never

interested in making "pretty pictures."

## PAGES

By Amy Boaz

"As a mature artist, I give myself permission to explore. I

linger in the chaos; the unresolved state can be hideous; trust is necessary. I am willing to risk ruining my art before I shape any creative project into order and what may be called beauty."

In this autobiographical journey in three parts, written during the pandemic when she "was having a lengthy conversation with [her] soul," sculptor, ceramist and jewelry artist Claire Haye confronts a childhood in which she was indeed in an "unresolved state." The only child of parents "crippled by their own problematic histories," she was loved but largely neglected, she writes. Her mother, Beatrice, was a dancer born in Chicago to a Russian immigrant family, and her father, Heinz, an erudite German Jew who came to America in 1925. The marriage lasted only a few years, and by 1953, Beatrice takes her to live in New York City, where her mother starts a modern dance troupe and remarries a Dianetics mas-



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COURTESY IMAGE

**Haye's memoir confronts a difficult childhood between Chicago and New York, and her fledgling artistic career.**

ter, Jesse Lees, who becomes Beatrice's fourth husband.

Haye alternates her narrative with occasional stream-of-consciousness asides in italics that act like the narrator's id to her ego, and help the reader

understand more of how the unconventional behavior of her parents helped shape, and harm, her. There were the strict dietary restrictions of her dancer mother, on the one hand, and the strange dictates and paranoia of her

stepfather, on the other. All the while, her own father Heinz, living in a cheap hotel in Chicago, refuses to take care of his daughter.

"I have been abandoned by my father and relegated to a dust heap by my mother," Haye writes matter-of-factly and without bitterness. The child skips school to spend time in the library, and gets by thanks to her keen intelligence. Later, she is sent back to Chicago to live, though is cast out to make it on her own once she is 16.

Expected to become an artist in some fashion because of her eccentric family, Haye first chooses the theater, though she does manage to get a college degree. At age 21, in 1967, on her first day as a Cook County public aid worker, she meets the tall, ambitious man who will become her husband, Michael Haye, and falls in love at first sight. The ensuing narrative as rising middle-class wife and mother in Chicago, fledgling ceramist, printmaker and ultimately a wildly successful jewelry designer, pales compared to the tortured early years, though she writes articulately of the excitement of first "wrestling with materials to form art."

At age 30, Haye decides that she is an artist. "Now that the decision is made, my head is clear," she writes. "The map is on the wall. I have begun to slowly journey down the path to becoming myself."

Michael's serious heart issues prompt the family to change directions, and they move to Taos in 1978. It is a revelation for Haye, who becomes the artist "waiting to fully bloom." Even her parents, from whom she is often estranged over the years, find some affinity for the place.

The work concludes poignantly with the death of Haye's mother in 1995 — she worked up to the very end at age 84. The author is staying with Beatrice during her last days in her New York apartment, sitting at her mother's bedside where there rests a letter written by the author years before "when I was trying to find a more balanced view of her," writes Haye. "It must be important to her," she wonders of her mother. "Does she read it? Often?"

## CLAIRE HAYE WILL BE READING FROM HER WORK

Sunday May 21 at 4 p.m.

at SOMOS Salon and Bookshop,  
108 Civic Plaza Drive. For more, visit  
somostaos.org.