

# Fathers' daughters

Literary bright  
lights talk  
of the  
writing life  
in Madison

By Lisa Reisman  
Special to the Times

**T**HE LONELY WRITER holed up in a dusky garret turning out great works of literature? Not entirely true for critically acclaimed authors and poets Honor Moore and Victoria Redel, who made a joint appearance at R.J. Julia Booksellers on a recent Thursday night in Madison.

While composing her latest book, Honor Moore made it a practice of walking down tree-lined Riverside Drive on the Upper West Side to Redel's apartment.

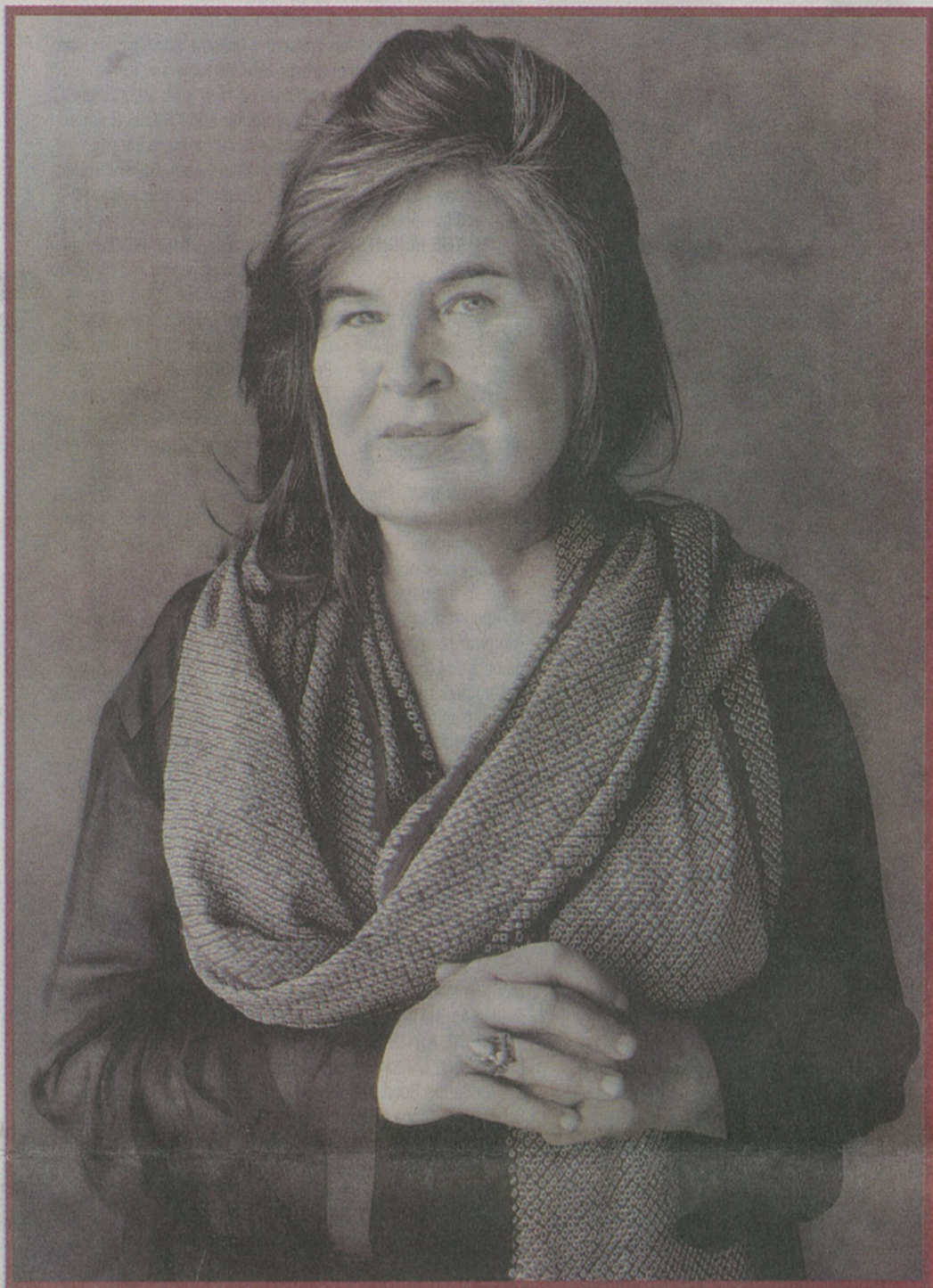
"I'd sit in an adjoining room and type away," said the stately 64-year-old Moore, who teaches writing at Columbia University and The New School. "Once in a while we'd read to each other."

As it happened, both were writing about their fathers—and their father's secrets: Moore through memoir in "The Bishop's Daughter" and Redel in the novel "The Border of Truth." In her memoir, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2008, Moore traces the life of her father the bishop Paul Moore, Jr. and her often turbulent relationship with him.

"His was an extraordinary life," said Moore, "not least because it evoked the defining issues of our time." A decorated World War II Marine Corps captain and perhaps the best known Episcopal clergyman in the United States, the six-foot-five larger-than-life figure, who died in 2003, became nationally known as an advocate for civil rights, marching with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma and captivating the nation by bringing political activism into the priesthood. At the same time, he was a father of a large family and seemingly devoted husband struggling to conceal an essential part of his identity over a period of nearly 30 years.

The father of Victoria Redel had a colorful past of his own, fleeing Nazi-occupied Belgium and boarding the Quanza, a Portuguese steamship filled with Jewish refugees. Eighty-six passengers, among them Redel's father, were denied entry first in New York, then in Mexico. It was only when the Quanza anchored for coal in Virginia on September 11, 1940 that a State Department official finally granted them visas, at First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's behest, saving them from repatriation and certain death.

It was with that "kernel" of her father's experience, as she put it to the small-but-spirited audience, that the tall, dark-featured Redel, who's published several collections of poetry as well as the 2001 Los Angeles Times Best Book "Loverboy," found her way into the bigger novel. Using the historical incident as background, "The Border of Truth" imagines a young Belgian refugee, Itzak Lejdel, among the passengers of the Quanza, pleading, in



a vigorous letter-writing campaign to Eleanor Roosevelt, for the First Lady's intercession. The correspondence alternates with the 2003 story of Itzak's daughter, Sara, a 41-year-old single professor with a penchant for married lovers who's in the process of adopting a war-refugee child.

"Having any kind of family history means having secrets," said Redel, 48, of the fictional Sara's frustration at her father's reluctance to discuss his background for a questionnaire required by the adoption agency.

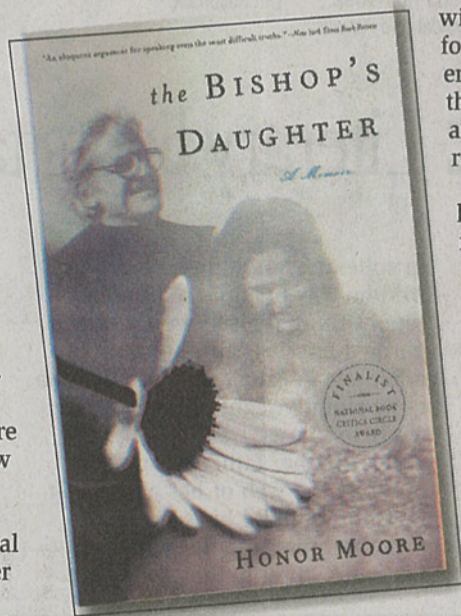
"Like many first-generation immigrants and refugees his age who survived traumatic experiences during the war, Itzak believes that the past should be left behind and not discussed," added Redel, who teaches at Sarah Lawrence and in the writing program at Columbia University.

Even Redel's own father, her "first and deepest research source" for "The Border of Truth," took a while to open up. The trick, she said, was asking questions "on the periphery"—for example, about his school uniform. And then she watched a dreamy



look come over his face and heard the words "really scratchy" come out of his mouth because "before he could describe it, he was in it again, reliving that feeling."

For Moore, writing her memoir was also an act of reliving. "When we go through our lives," she said, "we're living them so we're not paying attention in some way, especially during one's childhood and the connections of one's childhood to later life." In the case of her father, there was an integral part of himself that he kept hidden from her until she was 45. "So what I wanted to do was to



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come to know who my father really was by going through his life and our lives together with that piece of information."

Having spent the greater part of her adulthood "painfully estranged" from him, she comes to understand, beginning with their reconciliation in the face of his terminal illness, his impossible situation. "He had nine children and a wife, he wanted to stay married to his wife because

in spite of everything he loved her." And he was living in a different time. Outing himself would have harmed not just him, but a lot of other people, she said, "people who quite simply might not have been ready to know."

Not that her father wasn't tortured by the web of lies and deceit he spun to guard his secret, a condition his daughter witnesses firsthand. "If only they knew the

truth," she recalls him saying in his last years, "thinking of people who praised his life," "his body moving in large waves of sobbing." That was Moore's challenge, as she saw it: to reveal her father as he could never disclose himself—this, in spite of knowing that her exposure would—and indeed did—roil both her family and the Episcopal Church.

Perhaps Itzah—Redel's fic-

tional father—says it best in one of his letters to Eleanor Roosevelt: "Sometimes I think we need to tell our stories more than anyone needs to hear our stories," he writes. "But other times it is almost as if the story itself wants repeating ... So that ... we're not alone and left with the burden of remembering."