



Story time

Novelist and singer Alba Arikha will be appearing at this month's Queens Park Book Festival. *Pendle Harte* meets her to talk about writing her memoir and having Samuel Beckett as a godfather



There's a lot of alliteration in Alba Arikha's life. Everything begins with the letter A, though it's something she claims never to have thought about. Her father, the artist Avigdor Arikha; her mother, poet Anne Atik, her children Asecanio and Arianna (though their surname begins with B). It means nothing to her, apart from "always being first for everything" as a schoolgirl – one of the small but significant details that make up her memoir, *Major/Minor*.

Arikha now lives in Queens Park with her composer husband and her two children (ages 16 and 10). She lived in New York and Italy after growing up in Paris and spending childhood summers in Israel. On first impressions she is a smiling, slightly shy woman, tall and elegant, with an unplaceable transatlantic accent. Her third book *Major/Minor* is a memoir of her childhood and adolescence, told in an emotive, fragmented way, a collection of isolated memories telling a story that spans generations and takes in the concentration camps, stolen identities, communist Romania and teenage insecurities as well as art, music, literature and Samuel Beckett. Arikha has a concise, deadpan turn of phrase that captures the intensity of her youth, and her book includes lots of childish observations that are simple, seemingly unconnected but piercingly perceptive.

Does she clearly remember the feeling of being a child? Did that come with writing or had she held onto it?

"I think I had that feeling for many years, even when I wasn't a child," she says,

slightly awkwardly. Her paragraphs are short and captivating. "We seldom travel and our adventures are purely cerebral," is one, for instance.

Mostly, the story is about Arikha's father and their complicated relationship, caused in part by his troubled history. "I am aware of the disparity between my father's memory and my reality," she says in the book. Did he ever read it? "He never read it, though my agent tried to get it published before he died. I wasn't sure whether he'd like it and no, I didn't really want him to read it. It was sort of a cathartic experience to write it." Arikha's father is a difficult man and Arikha's adolescence is characterised by rebelling against his very fixed views on art, music and behaviour. "He came from a very different world, an old Eastern European world and a very different life – you know, with the camps and all that, and had a very mixed nationality, he was very passionate and even though I rebelled against classical music and all that, it trickled down really." A crucial point, made at least twice in the book, both times by Arika's mother, is that her father never had an adolescence and his childhood was taken away from him, in October 1941. "Taken away by men in pale grey uniform." Arikha explains: "I wanted to write about his adolescence in the war, and my adolescence, and the clash between us, and about memory and the interpretation of memory."

Arikha's godfather is Samuel Beckett, a man who, in the book, comes round to dinner a lot and whom everyone reveres.

Teenage Arikha is irritated at everyone going on about him being special: "the overbearing habit of highlighting a uniqueness I have recognised on my own." These days, Arikha is increasingly often invited to lecture about Beckett. "I love his work but I'm not an expert at all, as I hope is clear in the book. When I was a child he was just a lovely man who came over and recited poetry." It wasn't until she was 20 that she began to read his work and love it. "You could tell he was special, there was definitely an aura about him, something very quiet and introspective, he was tall and you had to look up to him and the way people were around him, you could tell. When he came my father used to sit down with him and they'd listen to music and everybody had to be very quiet and I used to find that highly irritating," she says.

The book is a personal history, intertwined with political history, and focuses on Arikha's increasing awareness of the relationship between the two. She says: "I didn't put the story together as a child but I knew it was there and sometimes it got in the way of things. I wrote the book in the present tense, so that way it was sitting right there." Her next book will be completely different, a psychological thriller about a pianist. "Not about me at all," she says. We look forward to it. 🌸

Alba Arikha will be in conversation with Rosa Rankin-Gee at 6pm on 19 May at the Queens Park Book Festival. *Major/Minor* is published by Quartet Books, £15. Qpark.org.uk/bookfestival