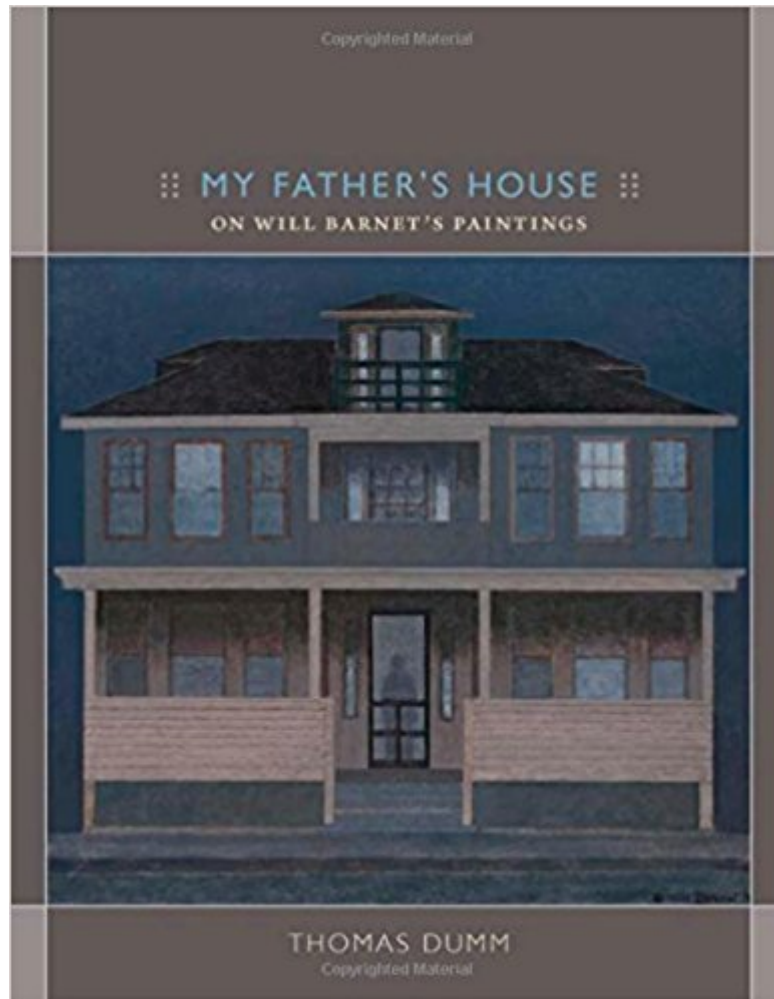


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# My Father's House: On Will Barnet's Paintings



## Synopsis

In *My Father's House*, the political philosopher Thomas Dumm explores a series of stark and melancholy paintings by the American artist Will Barnet. Responding to the physical and mental decline of his sister Eva, who lived alone in the family home in Beverly, Massachusetts, Barnet began work in 1990 on what became a series of nine paintings depicting Eva and other family members, as they once were and as they figured in the artist's memory. Rendered in Barnet's signature quiet, abstract style, the paintings, each featured in full color, present the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of a twentieth-century American family. Dumm first became acquainted with Barnet and his paintings in 2008. Given his scholarly focus on the lives of ordinary people, he was immediately attracted to the artist's work. When they met, Dumm and Barnet began a friendship and dialogue that lasted until the painter's death in 2012, at the age of 101. This book reflects the many discussions the two had concerning the series of paintings, Barnet's family, his early life in Beverly, and his eighty-year career as a prominent New York artist. Reading the almost gothic paintings in conversation with the writers and thinkers key to both his and Barnet's thinking—Emerson, Spinoza, Dickinson, Benjamin, Cavell, Nietzsche, Melville—Dumm's haunting meditations evoke broader reflections on family, mortality, the uncanny, and the loss that comes with remembrance.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Highly recommended. I live very close to his father's house on Prospect Hill in Beverly. Mine is a

house of the same vintage and style and while reading the book and looking at the paintings, I've experienced the feelings conveyed by both author and artist. We inhabit such place for a brief moment between eternities and the pain, loss and loneliness of previous dwellers can be sensed particularly in the quiet dawn twilight of Barnett's palette. It took Professor Dumm's beautiful prose to bring this all out and for that I thank him. The house today:

A great read. Dumm begins by reflecting on families, houses and solitude, and then moves onto look at how each painting informs these concepts. Dumm's writing is consistently clear and accessible. He establishes many interesting conversations with literary figures and various theorists to shed light on his explications of these paintings. Dumm perhaps poses more questions than answers but this is worthwhile because he gives us a vocabulary to reflect on these questions in his beautiful introduction. Highly recommended!

I am mostly familiar with Will Barnett's work through his delightful serigraphs of the 1970s. I didn't know about the My Father's House series of paintings, now donated to colleges around New England, until I read this book. It isn't art criticism or history, it is a well-considered musing on the artist's struggle to reflect memory, family, and place, while connecting the past to the future and back to the past. And on how we live going forward with all the terror and beauty of life. The essay writing style of the text invites us to consider our own thoughts and reactions to the paintings. As with other art, meaning comes from both the artist and the viewer...or reader.-Sally Ann Sims, author of Halt at X: A North of Boston Novel

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