



MY FATHER

THE

PORNO

OGRAPHER

*a Memoir*

CHRIS OFFUTT

Chris Offutt is a writer of literary fiction. His late father Andrew was a writer, but mostly of pornography. A very good one, by all accounts, he was a success story of sorts in the heyday of erotic novels (the 1960s and 1970s, before VHS ruined it for pornographic novels). For his spon, Andrew Offutt's career could be a source of bemused humor, embarrassment, sadness (he was very talented) or a little creepy. In this compelling memoir that reminded me of the documentary film "Crumb," it's all of these things and more. Chris becomes the one designated by his dad (in a "secret" will that Chris immediately revealed to his siblings) with the sole task of sorting through that sanctum of sanctum, his father's office space in their rambling home. Doing so entailed not just sorting through the hundreds of erotic novels his dad wrote but literally almost a ton of pornography created by others, including photos and comics and magazines and more. The story of this excavation quietly morphs into a memoir of Chris's childhood, where his dominating and demanding dad held sway over their household. It's lovely, touching and unexpected, with Chris able to simultaneously realize contradictory ideas. Chris remembers his dad would limit phone conversations between Chris and his mom to an almost pathological degree but also knows that they loved each other very much. He dives deeper and deeper into his dad's parallel career as a pornographer and a once-promising writer of sci-fi and more. (Piers Anthony pops in as an admirer and Andrew Offutt must be the only person in the world to have had a one-sided feud with Robert Heinlein.) And always, there is the porn. I just skimmed through the list of titles for the works (mostly erotic) Andrew produced but Chris waded through much of them, always in search of the artistic impulse and sometimes finding it (though mostly in non-erotic areas). He weeps for his father's lost talent, a man once so admired he headed major sci-fi conventions and writers' groups. Ultimately Chris comes closer and closer to the upsetting realization that the degradation of women so omnipresent in his dad's work was an element his dad quite simply enjoyed. It's a complicated revelation, complete with several others that amount to the late-movie revelations in the film "Crumb." It's humane, sad, disturbing and real. Would anyone ever want to read porn written by their dad? Not me. But this book? It does credit to Andrew and Chris and is a unique and revealing work, not to mention a pretty thorough coming of age memoir by an acclaimed writer. You'll laugh and cringe, often at the same time. -- Michael Giltz