

## Schmidt Steps Back

by Louis Begley; New York, Ballantine Books, 2013, 400 pages

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The book *Schmidt Steps Back* is yet another novel by Louis Begley about “Schmidt,” a rich New York lawyer (the other books were *Schmidt Delivered* and *About Schmidt*, which was made into a movie with Jack Nicholson playing Schmidt). Schmidt (as he is called by his friends, because he dislikes his given name, Albert, and its diminutives) is retired from a big law firm now and is handling a big foundation for billionaire Mike Mansour.

We are meeting Schmidt on New Year’s Eve, 2008, while he awaits the arrival from Paris of Alice Verplanck, a well-to-do widow of his former law partner. He has been in love with her for years. Yet he has not seen her for 15 years, since a conflict arose at the discovery of her relationship with another man while she was involved

with Schmidt. While Schmidt is waiting, the story turns back those 15 years. We find out that Alice’s husband was involved with his French lawyer-friend, Bruno, and died of AIDS (Alice had found out after one of her children died suddenly). Alice was later involved with Schmidt’s former college classmate, an obnoxious Bulgarian refugee. We get bits and pieces about Schmidt’s marriage, the death of his wife, and a very complicated relationship between him and his only child, Charlotte, who lost her child in pregnancy and subsequently became seriously depressed and sought treatment from a psychoanalyst. Charlotte’s unhappy marriage and difficult relationship with Schmidt were complicated by the intrusions of her bitchy psychiatrist-mother-in-law. After the loss of her child, Charlotte divorced, found another man, and started to patch her relationship with Schmidt, and then

she tragically died. Schmidt, at the sunset of his life (he is 78 now), is a lonely man yearning for the last chance at a meaningful relationship, this time with Alice. That is the core of Schmidt’s latest story, but the happenings are also intertwined with the stories of his billionaire boss, his former girlfriend, and his friends.

The heroes—the very rich—and the setting—Manhattan, the Hamptons, and surroundings—seem to be reflected in the author’s rich and verbose writing style. The book is surprisingly good and would make for easy summer reading. The story is intriguing, probably intended to show us that similar to the rest of us, the very rich have problems, too. I found it interesting that the author, Louis Begley, is about Schmidt’s age, is a former lawyer with a big New York firm, had a practice in Paris, and married (second marriage) a French-born historian and biographer. Is Schmidt Louis Begley’s alter ego? It clearly seems like it, although Schmidt was not born a Polish Jew who barely escaped the Nazis and left postwar Poland for Paris and later New York, as Louis Begley was and did.

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