Acclaimed Italian novelist Niccolo Ammaniti has been widely praised for his bone-chilling stories about adolescent boys on the verge of manhood who are just beginning to sense that their fathers are not infallible beings, but often are quite ignorant and pathetic - and sometimes downright cruel.

In his new work, "As God Commands," Ammaniti once again visits familiar territory with his customary skill and bravado. Ammaniti delivers a highly charged narrative that centers on the tumultuous life of 13-year-old Christiano Zena and his often drunk, Nazi-ranting, unemployed laborer father, Rino. Christiano is overwhelmed by the sheer physical force of his father and feels he has no other recourse other than submission. There is no maternal figure in Christiano's life; his mother fled when he was just a baby and a complete lack of feminine warmth and nurturing seems to pollute these pages.

Christiano, an outcast at school, spends most of his time with his father and his father's eccentric friends. There is Danilo, who lives in a perpetual state of agony since his toddler daughter accidentally choked to death and his wife soon left him, and Corrado, known to all by his nickname, Quattro Formaggi, after the pizza he loves to eat.

Quattro Formaggi was injured in a childhood accident and never quite recovered. Mentally challenged, he drinks excessively and watches pornographic movies and devotes a great deal of time to decorating his living room into a grotesque caricature of the nativity scene, which he does not permit anyone to see.

Rino, Danilo and Quattro Formaggi are planning to rob a bank by knocking down one of the bank's brick walls with a tractor and stealing the ATM inside, and they spend most of their time together trying to figure out how to pull this off.

Ammaniti's language is often stark and simultaneously intense, but there seems to be an almost genetic coldness streaming throughout it. It is difficult for the reader to feel close to anybody. Even Christiano, who is surely the most sympathetic of the bunch, is already tainted by his father's rage and impulsiveness and sense of entitlement.

When he sees a classmate's bike parked against a tree, Christiano slashes the tires and runs away with his heart pumping uncontrollably, but with little or no remorse. Another time, at his father's insistence, he is forced to go shoot a barking dog. He does so robotically, thinking only of the warm bed he can return to as soon as the deed is done.

The core of this novel is the deep rifts that often separate so many fathers and sons, the muted aggressiveness and competitiveness, the feeling of dread that permeates; the feeling that at any moment, things could spin wildly out of control.

Ammaniti seems to be able to almost channel the fragile mind-set of the young Christiano. He describes the young boy's frustration when dealing with his volatile father:

"It was strange - with everyone else he was brilliant at lying. He could spin the most outrageous yarns with such self-assurance that nobody doubted him. But with his father it was different, he just couldn't do it, he felt those black eyes boring through him in search of the truth. Even when fooling around, the tension was oppressive. He had to win every time. He always lost against his father. At darts. At arm-wrestling. At everything. Even at ping-pong, where Christiano knew he was an ace and his father was crap. He would get to eighteen or nineteen-six, and only two points away from trouncing him, then that bastard would start telling him he was tiring, that he was scared of winning - he would dazzle him with words and he wouldn't score another point and Rino would win."

When Ammaniti describes Christiano, the reader senses he is drawing on his own autobiographical troubles. Ammaniti has admitted in interviews that his own relationship with his father, who is a Freudian psychologist, has had its share of hurdles to overcome.

Before writing became his primary passion, the author attended Rome University, planning to become a biologist, but dropped out soon before graduation and lied to his father about it for months. He pretended he was working on his master's thesis while in reality he had begun his first novel but could not quite summon the courage to tell his father he had dropped out of school, or explain to him his desire to devote himself to full-time writing.

Ammaniti has said that his father was very rigid and traditional in his upbringing, and the reader can't help but wonder if his many excursions in fiction into the messy terrain of fathers and sons and the abuses of patriarchal authority isn't his own form of self-therapy. Regardless, one can't help but be enthralled by his keen insights into the degradations that mar so many familial relationships.
fiction

As God Commands,

by Niccolo Ammaniti, $14.95

Elaine Margolin, Special to The Denver Post

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