

Like father, like 'Swan' **Natalie Portman's dad is just as talented —** **both as a Long Island doctor and new** **novelist**

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The hallway leading to Dr. Avner Hershlag's Long Island office is lined with pictures of hundreds of children he's helped conceive. But on and around his desk, he keeps shots of one particularly pretty, bright-eyed girl — Natalie Portman.

Hershlag, a prominent fertility doctor, is the actress' father. And now he's celebrating his Oscar-nominated daughter's own fertility. He got the good news when Portman called and asked him and her mom, Shelley, to get on the phone at the same time.

"We are very elated and excited, very happy for Natalie and Ben and very happy to have a new baby in our family very soon," Hershlag says of his daughter, an only child, and her beau Benjamin Millepied.

AP



Natalie Portman with her parents, Avner and Shelley Hershlag.

Babies are Hershlag's business. And as proud as he clearly is of his daughter, what he really wants to talk about is his work at the Center for Human Reproduction at North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset, LI. In his 20 years there, Hershlag estimates he's "made thousands" of babies through in vitro fertilization.

And now, he's written a novel — in his spare time, he says, "from 3 to 5 in the morning." "Misconception" is a medical-political thriller. Drawing on Hershlag's experience in his field, it's a fast-paced mix of scientific fact and fiction.

The book, set in Washington, DC, centers on Dr. Anya Krim, the first lady's fertility specialist, who makes house calls to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. There's also a conservative US senator whose comatose daughter is suddenly pregnant, a severed head in a tank of frozen nitrogen, purloined embryos and even human cloning.

Human cloning?

"We have several humans cloned right in my lab," Hershlag says with a straight face. "I'll show you in a minute."

Then he breaks into laughter.

Hershlag is from Israel and speaks with a noticeable accent (his parents emigrated there from Eastern Europe in 1939). He met Natalie's mother at Ohio State University, where he spent a few months taking courses.

When he returned to Israel, Hershlag says, "We corresponded and talked on the phone, and when I say 'we,' it was more me than her." They got married in Cincinnati, in what he calls "a typical Jewish wedding. Our initials were on the napkins, on the matchboxes . . ."

Portman was born in Jerusalem in 1981. The family moved here, first to the suburbs of Washington, DC, then Connecticut, and finally to Long Island, when Natalie was about 8. When she started acting, Portman took her Cincinnati grandmother's maiden name to maintain family privacy.

In a twist on the legend of Lana Turner being discovered at the soda fountain of a Hollywood drugstore, Portman was noticed in a Long Island pizza parlor at 10 by a Revlon representative who thought she'd be just right for commercials. But, Portman recently told "CBS Sunday Morning," "I was like, 'I don't want to model. I want to act.' "

Her first film role was as a hit girl, a 12-year-old orphan taken in and mentored by a hit man neighbor. At first, Mom and Dad

disagreed with that choice. “My parents were very, very protective people,” Portman said. “I mean they were like, ‘No, absolutely not.’ ” After some script adjustments, they relented.

Hershlag tapped into his own creative side with the novel, in part to show people the “ethical challenges and issues” in his field.

After touring his office’s embryo lab and cryogenic storage room, Hershlag touts a new program the center has developed for freezing a woman’s eggs. It would be a breakthrough for women diagnosed with cancer.

They could have their healthy eggs frozen before treatment, which can cause infertility. When they become cancer-free, the eggs will be available.

He also says the program will create “reproductive equality among genders,” because it will allow women to avoid making decisions based on their biological clock.

“Some women are in a big rush to find Mr. Right because they want to have children,” Hershlag says. “For young women who don’t have a guy yet, it’s like taking reproductive insurance. They can be more relaxed and take their time in choosing a partner.”

So if “Misconception” ever made its way to the big screen, does Hershlag have a recommendation for who should play the heroine doctor, Anya?

“Look, this is definitely a very, very strong part for a female protagonist who is interesting, complex, sophisticated and, yes, pretty as well,” he says. “But it is her professional and moral stand in this world, and her leadership in medicine and the fact that she cares for the first lady and president that makes her outstanding. My daughter could definitely be a great Anya.”

Grudgingly, Hershlag answers one more question about his daughter, an Oscar favorite in the Best Actress field for “Black Swan.”

What will you be wearing to the Oscars?

“I think an evening gown,” the doctor says.

And for more than 10 seconds, he laughs.