

Family: The Way We Were, the Way We Are Seasons in the Contemporary American Family

“Past lives live in us, through us. Each of us harbors the spirits of people who walked the earth before we did, and those spirits depend on us for continuing existence, just as we depend on their presence to live our lives to the fullest.”
--John Edgar Wideman

For every human being, family life encompasses enduring seasons that form a cycle: growing up, breaking away or breaking down, making choices, looking back, surviving. Such categories may have little to do with age, economic status, or geographical location. But their commonality in American life, as reflected in the books chosen for this series, will challenge readers to define or redefine the meaning of “family” today and, in so doing, to discover something of themselves.

These works not only reflect seasons in the family but also illustrate some of the best contemporary American writing. They provide us with a variety of literary genres: a “western” autobiography of Ivan Doig (*This House of Sky*), plays of Tennessee Williams and Lorraine Hansberry (*The Glass Menagerie*, *A Raisin in the Sun*); wide-ranging short stories in *Points of View*, and finally the novels represented by Judith Guest’s *Ordinary People* and Joan Chase’s *During the Reign of the Queen of Persia*. The families in these works are diverse in their circumstances but share much in common. They are, with one exception, post—World War II American families, and the characters in the books invite us to think about where we’ve been, in both the recent and the distant past.

Our writers structure their works around the process of remembering and the role memory plays in shaping the lives of the families they portray. Doig’s memoir is not just a portrait of the artist as a young man, but it also pays loving tribute to those who produced and inspired him. Williams’ Tom Wingfield is as much a prisoner of his past decision to break away from his family as his mother, Amanda, is still a captive of her idealized southern bellehood and her memory of a husband who deserted her. Chase’s four girlish narrators recall with caustic humor their prepubescent longings as they weave a tapestry of complex emotional patterns about several generations of women on an Ohio farm. Guest’s Jarrett family has blocked a painful memory which they must learn to face if they are to survive. Hansberry’s play portrays the clash between one black family’s heritage and the present-day reality of economic pressures and ethnic assimilation. Each writer implies that we cannot begin to understand where we are going until we confront our past and the way it affects present and future behavior.

The publication dates of these works span nearly forty years, from 1945 to 1983. American family life has undergone great change since World War II, and some of the books reflect the hows and whys of this phenomenon. Scientific discoveries and the upheavals of wars have brought with them a questioning of traditional values, especially by the younger generation, spawning what is now an accepted cliché, the “generation gap.” Families have become increasingly fragmented, because economic conditions have forced people from the country to the city to seek jobs. The divorce rate has continued to rise, accompanied by a variety of domestic arrangements to accommodate it. Because we exist in a time of miraculous technology, we will live longer than ever. This means we must come to terms with aging and what to do with family members who face a rest home or moving in with others as they become more dependent. Such dilemmas of modern life are sensitively considered by the writers in this series.

For example, John Cheever’s urban commuter in “The Five-Forty-Eight” suggests the emotional sterility of a nine-to-five routine; the point of view reveals the monstrous complacency with which this character views his own adultery and deception. In Gina Berriault’s “Stone Boy,” John Updike’s “A & P,” and Guest’s *Ordinary People*, a boy rebels against an accepted value system to venture a risky independence. The status quo is represented by reactions of the adults in “The Stone Boy,” the bourgeois manager in “A & P,” and the pressure to achieve and conform to *Ordinary People*. The boredom of a factory job as well as a painful family situation compel Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* to light out for new territory, only to find he cannot escape his guilt about leaving home. In contrast to these urban themes, the two most recent books on our list, those of Doig and Chase, affirm the value of rural, generational lives, of families who stick together in spite of—perhaps because of—a changing world.

The sequence of books presents the cycle of life’s seasons. Two family sagas frame the series: Doig’s autobiography of patriarchal family and Chase’s novel of a matriarchal one. These books cover a broad time span, encompassing the cycle from growing up to surviving, and they give us a large perspective on the tragic and comic aspects of family life. In between these sagas are the more focused works, the closet dramas of Williams and Hansberry, the tightly structured *Ordinary People*, and the three short stories, severely limited in time, place, and action.

The books by Doig and Chase are multigenerational, but each has its main focus on a different generation. Doig’s concentrates on his growing up in Montana and the tremendous impact his ranch-hand father and, later, his tough-minded grandmother have on his life. Chase’s book is dominated by a grandmother whose behavior is a lesson in survival tactics—surviving despite hard toil, an unhappy marriage, and, especially, the problems of daughters and granddaughters.

The plays by Hansberry and Williams illustrate the tension between looking back and breaking away. The past—in the form of a dead husband and an absent one—haunts the action of both plays. Williams' play *is* memory—that of Tom Wingfield, who physically escapes his family, although he cannot break away from the emotional ties of love and guilt. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, a legacy from a dead man as well as the strong, traditional values of Grandma Younger (“looking back”) clash with the desires of her son and granddaughter to break with the old ways to forge new lives beyond the claustrophobic ghetto.

Ordinary People is about breaking down and breaking up, the disintegration of a wealthy mid-western family in the face of a terrible crisis: the loss of a son and brother. It is also about “growing up,” since both Conrad and his father learn to take responsibility for their actions without blame or remorse. Finally, each of the three selected stories from *Points of View*—Berriault’s “Stone Boy,” Updike’s “A & P,” and Cheever’s “Five-Forty-Eight”—represent “making choices.” The central characters are at crossroads, at various levels of maturity and awareness, but their lives will be forever changed at story’s end. The reader is put in the position of judging a character’s choice, speculating on why it was made, and then asking, “What if this happened to me?”

This literature reflects us and our environment. The world outside the family impinges on it constantly, and the world within the family creates its own honey and its poisons, too. By exploring the American family in its seasons and cycles, readers will discover that the line between life and art blurs in discussions so close to home.

This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind
by Ivan Doig

Ivan Doig’s autobiography is a tale of growing up once-upon-a-time-in-the-West. It is also a tribute to a dying way of life, and a success story of breaking away from one’s past only to realize that, if one has a past like this, it is worth cherishing and chronicling. *This House of Sky* begins with the death of Doig’s mother at 31, when the author was only 6. From that day on, Ivan and his father, Charlie, become inseparable partners and unique friends. The failure of Charlie’s second marriage brings them even closer. Young Ivan feels “as though I was already grown and raised” with “an awareness that I was being counted special by being allowed into this blazing grownup world” of saloons and high adventure on the range. There are few children in the small Montana town, and Ivan must “board out” with other families to attend school in the winter, while his father works the high country. To stabilize their small family, Charlie summons Bessie (“Lady”) Ringer, Ivan’s maternal grandmother. Much of the book is taken up with the forging of this remarkable trinity, as Lady and Charlie grudgingly bury their differences in their greater love for Ivan.

We begin to understand the forces that shape Ivan's talent as a writer: Charlie's daredevil antics and extraordinary stories, and Lady's freewheeling slang. Lives that seem harsh evoke lyrical descriptions, and actions become heroic etched against the Montana horizon. From an unorthodox upbringing emerges an affirmation of traditional virtues embodied in the Doig family's closeness and their honesty with others.

A Raisin in the Sun
by Lorraine Hansberry

The Glass Menagerie
by Tennessee Williams

Trapped by family ties and circumstances beyond their control, the central characters in these two plays dream of a better life and of breaking away from financial and spiritual poverty. In both works, the need for illusion is great, its clash with reality inevitable.

Hansberry's Younger family lives in a Chicago ghetto but is at a moment when "freedom" seems near. A widow, Mama Younger receives a \$10,000 check from the life insurance policy of her dead husband. The money, which would be worth three times as much today, is the catalyst that brings on the family's social revolution and internal evolution. Mama can buy a house in a white neighborhood, but can the family handle an uncertain future of white hostility? She can give her son money for his business venture, but can she trust him to invest wisely? Strong-minded but compassionate, Mama realizes she can only influence her children by her dignity and embracing love. The play presents us with an old-fashioned test of character for each family member and has rightly been lauded for its humor and its fairness in its treatment of explosive racial issues.

In Williams' play, Tom Wingfield remembers a decisive moment in the life of his family. The time is the Depression, the place St. Louis, and the family is shabbily genteel and fatherless. His shy sister, Laura, is not only physically but also psychologically disabled; she collects glass figurines, which symbolize her own emotional fragility. Their mother, Amanda, is a frayed southern belle, who hopes to teach her daughter how to use "charm" to get a man. Tom is a frustrated poet who works in a warehouse, escaping to the movies when reality comes too near.

The hopes of the family are pinned to the Gentleman Caller, Jim O'Connor, "the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for." His appearance, like that

of the \$10,000 in *A Raisin in the Sun*, brings the family to a crisis. For a while, his attention transforms Laura, but ultimately the Wingfield women are again deserted by men, their dreams shattered like the fragile glass unicorn Jim accidentally drops. The absent father, in the form of an ever-smiling photograph, presides over the apartment, foreshadowing the imminent flight of his disenchanted son. In the final lines of the play, we see that the family “ties that bind,” especially Tom’s memories of Laura, are not as easily broken as the pieces in her glass menagerie.

Ordinary People

by Judith Guest

Guest’s first novel portrays with psychological accuracy a family tragedy—the death of a son. It moves us because the unexpected death of a young person is a special loss, bringing with it guilt for those left behind. The three remaining Jarretts of Lake Forest, Illinois, try to cope with what they were and will become. These “ordinary people” are the epitome of the American success ethic: the father, Calvin, a self-made attorney; Beth, the beautiful wife, envied for her perfect house, her bridge and tennis games; their son, Conrad, the overachiever.

The book opens shortly after Conrad has suffered a breakdown and is trying to come back from a private hell to a fearsome world. The family’s inability to talk about their grief assaults the readers like a litany of “shoulds” and “what ifs.” Guilt becomes a disease: Conrad blames himself; Beth blames her son; Calvin, the compassionate father, is caught in the middle. Everyone keeps a tight rein on feeling, and the unspoken commandment is “Thou shalt not fail”—in school, in marriage, in life. Conrad’s breakdown only augurs the family’s breakup.

The hero of Conrad’s healing, Berger, is a scruffy and savvy psychiatrist, who succeeds in getting his client to feel again. Unable to please his mother or confide in his father and friends, Conrad treats Berger like an extended family member and a godlike figure to whom “confessions” may be offered. Eventually even Calvin avails himself of Berger’s services. But Beth abhors the invasion of privacy (or admission of failure) that counseling would bring. Guest implies that we are not self-sufficient and that reaching beyond the family unit for help is not only desirable but often necessary for survival.

Conrad’s emotional breakdown and Calvin’s break from rigidity lead to a breakthrough for both of them. If Conrad fails to live up to perfection, he will not be punished, while Calvin learns, “You are not God, you do not know, you are not in control, so let go.” Their expression of love for each other brings with it a hope of mending their mutual loss.

Points of View: An Anthology of Short Stories
edited by James Moffett and Kenneth McElheny

“The Stone Boy,” by Gina Berriault

“A & P,” by John Updike

“The Five-Forty-Eight,” by John Cheever

These three stories involve “making choices,” crystallized by a single fateful event, the consequences of which may not be fully resolved by story’s end. Such is the form of the contemporary story—to be finished in the reader’s own imagination. Further, the stories are studies in contrasts. Each narrator is at a different stage in life (childhood, adolescence, midlife crisis), in a different location (rural, suburban, big-city), and at a different economic level (living on a farm, working in a store, and working in a white-collar job).

“The Stone Boy” recounts a tale of two young brothers, Arnold and Eugie, involved in a shooting accident while they are picking peas for their mother. After his rifle discharges, killing Eugie, Arnold continues to gather peas, then returns home to announce calmly, “Eugie’s dead.” The reader is left to judge the boy, the consequences of his actions, and his choice to withhold his feelings from his parents. We see there will be no psychiatrist, as in *Ordinary People*, to help Arnold and his family to communicate. No one knows how to share Arnold’s grief, and the story offers no signposts, other than everyday chores which need to be done, life which must continue.

Updike’s “A & P” depicts a rite of passage as 19-year-old Sammy tells of a crisis in his job as cashier at the A & P. Because of a decision by the self-righteous manager to banish three scantily clad girls from the store, Sammy, in one grand gesture, resigns. No one cares. Sammy rejects the ugliness of the A & P, but with humor and irony, Updike shows the dangers of idealism. Though his family is not present in the story, Sammy realizes he will have to account to them for his behavior. The girls trigger an action that is irreversible, leaving Sammy with the painful knowledge of “how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter.”

In Cheever’s “Five-Forty-Eight,” we ride with Blake, a middle-aged man, on his suburban train to disquietude. His is being pursued by a Miss Dent, whom he knows. Afraid, he’s sure that she plans violence, yet he tells us he’s an “insignificant man” whose briefcase holds no secrets. Gradually we learn he *does* have secrets, as he muses upon his loveless marriage, his adultery, his unhappy children. The latent danger he fears appears at last to seek revenge on his mean spirit, and we ponder Miss Dent’s surprising choice of action. In the last scene, she renders a lesson to one who exploits others. But will the incident make a difference in Blake’s behavior?

During the Reign of the Queen of Persia

by Joan Chase

Joan Chase's first novel is one of sisters, mothers, and daughters and—not least—their men, who can never compete with the fierce bonds that link the Ohio farm women of the Krauss family. Chase's ability to give us memorable characters who revolve around their reigning "Queen of Persia," old Gram, is partly the result of her unique point of view: the "we" of four young cousins who speak as one. In the midst of family feuds, divided loyalties, awakening (and souring) sexuality, and deadly illness, Chase does not allow emotions to sag into sentimentality or tragedy. A tart and rowdy humor presides over a book about survival through love.

Chase's prose stretches from lyrical descriptions of nature to finely tuned dialogue for each character. The narrative goes back in time to Gram's youth and unfortunate marriage; Dan's courting of her daughter, Libby; then to Libby's battle with her two girls, especially Celia, eldest and most beautiful of the granddaughters. Early in the novel we see Celia's budding sexuality, breathlessly watched and envied by the three other girls. Mysteriously, her beauty fades with an early marriage; she leaves the farm only to return, wreathed in tragedy. The structure of the book is circular, beginning and ending with Celia.

The terminal illness of Grace, the favored daughter, unites the women, bringing Aunt Elinor, a New York advertising executive, back to Ohio to nurse Grace and convert her to Christian Science. Still, Grace dies, leaving her two daughters to Gram's care, and her embittered husband outside the family circle. One of Chase's messages is that constant renewal, the life force, is stronger than death or grief.

When Gram finally sells her farm to developers, she has no regrets, through her kin will feel the loss of their heritage. Her pragmatism may be a lesson to her daughters, but we also observe her nightly escapes to bingo and movies rather than to face a loveless marriage. The reader sees that survival has a price and may wonder whether or not Gram's powerful personality stultifies or inspires the family members who continue to orbit around her.

For Further Reading

Fiction and Autobiography

The Catcher in the Rye. J. D. Salinger. A classic novel about growing up urban, smart, and rebellious, featuring Holden Caulfield, who has become one of the most famous in a long line of American antiheroes. 1951, Little, Brown, *Bantam.

Growing Up. Russell Baker. A Pulitzer Prize-winning autobiography in which the author recalls with humor and wisdom his youth, his war experiences, his marriage to the “right” woman, and, not least, his tough-minded mom. 1982, Congdon & Weed, *New American Library.

Scenes from American Life: Contemporary Short Fiction. Edited by Joyce Carol Oates. Stories ranging from the realistic to the fantastic that afford the reader valuable moments of revelation and also provide insight into the artists who create those moments. 1973, Vanguard Press, *Random.

Sent for You Yesterday. John Edgar Wideman. A young black writer returns to his roots, the imaginary town of Homewood, to assume the responsibility of preserving his ghetto heritage, symbolized by the restless piano music of Albert Wilkes, a talent gunned down by the police. 1983., *Avon.

Tell Me a Riddle. Tillie Olsen. Four stories that present, in a rich yet economical style, the timeless emotions and situations of working-class people, who worry about money, loss, and lack of achievement. 1961, Lippincott, *Dell.

Women Working: An Anthology of Stories and Poems. Edited by Nancy Hoffman and Florence Howe. An unusually comprehensive collection of stories, poems, and commentary by a diverse group of women writers who examine how varied forms of work shape our lives for better or worse. 1979, *Feminist Press.

Nonfiction

At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present. Carl N. Degler. Controversial and challenging, this book traces two centuries of the history of women and the family, showing the conflict between domestic life and women’s desire for equality and independence. 1980, Oxford University Press (hardcover and paperback).

Changing Images of the Family. Edited by Virginia Tufte and Barbara Myerhoff. A collection of essays for the lay reader by authors in various fields—the arts, history, law, media—and how each of these disciplines affects and reflects our image of the family in the twentieth century. 1979, Yale University Press (hardcover and paperback).

The 50/50 Marriage. Gayle Kimball. Excerpts from interviews with 150 couples who talk about how to have successful, equal marriages in an increasingly difficult time for family life. 1983, Beacon Press.

Intimate Strangers. Lillian B. Rubin. The author's extensive research on the family and her knowledge of psychology are used to analyze the basic issues of sex, communication, and dependency between men and women. 1983, Harper.

Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life. Gail Sheehy. The book has become a "pop-psych" classic, yet it is thoroughly grounded in research and, in a highly readable style, deals with the chronological life stages men and women pass through as adults. 1976, Dutton, *Bantam.

Pathfinders. Gail Sheehy. The author guides us to ways in which we can lead more creative and fulfilling lives once we understand that we will go through passages ("psychological crises") as adults. 1981, Morrow, *Bantam.

Revolutions in Americans' Lives: A Demographic Perspective on the History of Americans, Their Families, and Their Society. Robert V. Wells. A demographic and historical approach to how our society has changed in two centuries, from one of high birth rate and death rate to the opposite situation, and how this change affects us now and may alter our lives in the future. 1982, Greenwood Press.

"The Way We Were, The Way We Are: Seasons in the Contemporary American Family" was developed by Julie P. Gordon. Dr. Gordon is Associate Dean and Assistant Professor at Northwestern's University College, the credit program in adult education. She holds a Ph.D. in English literature from Harvard University and has taught and programmed classes in literature, film, and art history. Her specialty is contemporary literature.

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