

The Dynamics of Dysfunction: To Laugh or Cry or Both

Family relationships have been mainstays of literature since time immemorial. Look no further than the tortured families of Joseph with that colorful coat or Noah after the flood in the Old Testament. William Shakespeare, too, penned a couple of dramas featuring some rather unbalanced families; *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Romeo and Juliet* all focus on families with significant quirks. American playwright Tennessee Williams based his literary claim to fame on the unusual family dynamics in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *The Glass Menagerie*. Even fairy tales occupy a corner of the demented family market, with tales of Cinderella and those evil stepsisters and Snow White living with dwarves. Writers have employed twisted families for plots through the literary ages. *The Godfather*, *Ordinary People*, and *Mommie Dearest* are a few dramatic examples. On the lighter side, look at television's best "weird" families—the Munsters or the Addamses for heaven's sakes!

Just because we are born into a set of family members doesn't mean that we will like them, respect them, or even get along with them. Dysfunctional families can stem from co-dependencies and the inability to break away from parents or children or siblings. Often times, such family dynamics come from abuse within the family unit. It is only recently that dysfunctional families have been acknowledged as a real psychological problem. In the past, individuals in this situation were expected to keep quiet about it, obey the parent or spouse (usually the father/husband) without question, smile, and learn to cope with it all. That's not necessarily the case nowadays, though, as therapists and counselors have developed methods to help struggling family members come to terms with their situations and the abnormal stresses that those dynamics place upon them. People who find themselves in this predicament often don't seek therapy. On the contrary, they do not talk; talk too much; retreat into self-made worlds; find solace in sex, alcohol, food, or drugs; or resort to violence.

Family dysfunction is a deep well for fiction authors: relatives tortured by the past and plagued in the present with conflict, violence, and fantasy. The darker the family, the better the plot for most readers. We like reading about troubled people, especially if those folks are more troubled than we think we are. When a family dynamic is more awkward and tense than our last Thanksgiving family reunion, we believe that maybe we could be "normal" after all. We enjoy other people's discomfort, whether it's Aunt Mildred yelling insults to her son with three failed marriages or Mike the linebacker intimidating his artistic little brother Les. When we read about such relationships, we can escape from our own, and that is such a relief.

The five novels in this *Let's Talk About It, Oklahoma* series can make readers cry or laugh or both. They show us problematic family relationships and how family members survive and even thrive amongst them. Larry Brown's *Joe* takes place in a Southern landscape. Innocent Gary Jones trades in his horrible father for a not-so-horrible substitute, Joe. Joe has many faults, but he takes the teenaged Gary under his wing and introduces him to "normal," simple things—like a toothbrush, something that Gary had never seen let alone used in his life. What Gary wants more than anything is to provide for his mother and sister and give them the freedom to move out of this tortured family situation. Joe helps set all of that in motion.

As a writer, Larry Brown is often compared to William Faulkner, the author of the oldest text in the group—*As I Lay Dying*. This classic novel provides us with another unusual father figure and the macabre situation of a Southern family—and some buzzards—trailing a dead woman about to be buried in her wedding dress. The Bundrens just aren't normal.

For those who enjoy a lighter, humorous point of view, don't miss the next three titles. Jonathan Tropper's *This Is Where I Leave You* proves that death brings families together and that there are few situations more uncomfortable than death amid a dysfunctional family. The protagonist, Judd, has just experienced the death of his father and the dissolution of his marriage. Grieving over the loss of the patriarch brings out the best and the worst in his family. The encounters and secrets are touching and comedic. Even in the middle of "sitting-shiva," the week-long funeral observance, we find dry, wry humor in the sorrow. Mom wants to tip the coroner. And we learn that the deceased father took his family to Temple because he could be wrong about his atheistic beliefs—better to be safe than sorry.

A book that will have readers crying and laughing at the same time is *My Last Days as Roy Rogers* by Pat Cunningham Devoto, a paean to Huck Finn and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Tab, our precocious protagonist, is pulled between her mother and grandmother. She learns to get along with both women and helps heal the resentments they harbor against each other. The bulk of the novel centers on Tab, her friend Maudie May, and Maudie's two young brothers. Action, humor, and tenderness abound in their secret summer clubhouse where they struggle with race, prejudice, and education. On the cusp of young adulthood, Tab learns that even best friends can't stay best friends forever.

Keeping with the lighter touch, *The Sleepy Hollow Family Almanac*, by Kris D'Agostino, takes us home with college dropout Calvin, where he finds that things are just as crazy now as before he left to attend film school. Amid the tragedy of losing the

family home, the discomfort of three adult children living at home, and the realism of a dying father, D'Agostino manages to keep readers chuckling at the Moretti family. This family is a bit bizarre, but Calvin hopes to save the day and bring everyone to grace and resolution.

Taken as a whole, these five books tell us that no one lives in a perfectly “normal” family. We all have baggage that affects our relationships. Sometimes we can cope; sometimes we can't. Reading about disjointed family relationships helps us understand that family trials are archetypal—they transcend time, race, culture, continent, and finances. It reassures us that maybe, just maybe, we aren't so bad off after all. And we might just find comfort in our own off-kilter family.

Joe

by Larry Brown

In this novel, author Larry Brown delivers some powerful characters—all of them dysfunctional. Wade Jones is the worst man on the face of the earth: he pimps his daughter, beats his wife, drinks too much, and sells his infant son. He keeps the family traveling from town to town, from dilapidated house to dilapidated house. Teenaged Gary is the lynchpin of the family—the one who provides stability and finances and effort to keep the familial unit as one. He needs a decent male role model. He gets one, but probably not the best. He gets Joe. Even though Joe has his own baggage of a failed marriage, prison time, and a violent temper, he's a better father than Wade is. Gary learns a lot from Joe—things he'd never learn in his own home, if he had one.

The book is not for sissies; the action and language are harsh and foul. The message is that family—regardless of the level of dysfunction—is valuable, and that a pretend father is sometimes better than the real thing. Brown has been compared to other Southern fiction writers such as William Faulkner and Carson McCullers. It's a good comparison. The plot is raw and rewarding, proving that good and inspiration can be found in the most unusual of places.

As I Lay Dying

by William Faulkner

William Faulkner is the premiere Southern author, and in this novel he writes of a fractured Mississippi family—the Bundrens—who seem anxious for the ill mother to die. The plot is told from various points of view: a child or the husband or friends or observers, and each has a special reason to will the mother's death—from Vardaman's wish for a banana, Dewey Dell's hope of an abortion, and Anse's desire for false teeth.

As the procession progresses, the family encounters flood and fire reaching biblical proportions. During the trip to the cemetery in Jefferson, each family member—including Addie, the deceased mother—reveals deep, disturbing secrets, making the plot stranger and the characters more and more distant from each other. Darl, the clairvoyant son, is perhaps the most sane because he knows everyone’s dirty little secrets. Known for his bizarre characters imbedded in weird family dynamics, with this novel Faulkner creates the most dysfunctional family in his canon.

This Is Where I Leave You

by Jonathan Tropper

In Jonathan Tropper’s book, cynical and downbeat Judd Foxman has problems. He’s lost his wife to his boss; his dad has died; his three sibling relationships are stilted; and he just can’t accept his mother’s clothing choices. The sitting-shiva ritual of week-long mourning is about all that these people can take, trying to stay together under one roof, attempting to maintain appearances, and tolerate each other during a trying time. Tropper’s dialogue is understated and wry, and if readers have ever experienced the death of a family member, they can relate to the edgy sentimentalism and humor. We identify with Judd’s difficulty in coping with personal loss and appreciate how he moves on to better days and improved relationships.

My Last Days as Roy Rogers

by Pat Cunningham Devoto

Written as a response to the fear of AIDS in the last part of the twentieth century in comparison to the fear of contracting polio in the mid-twentieth century, Devoto takes us on a Southern journey peopled with characters of all ages, races, creeds, and status. Tab, the young heroine, learns how to cope with the diverse members of her community—and family—and learns to be a healer of rifts. The title stems from Tab’s entering young adulthood as this summer ends her days of youthful play and make-believe. Reality creeps in as she struggles to reconcile racial and educational inequality and understand the grown-up world. The book will make readers laugh until they cry. It will also make them stop and think about why the world is how it is, and why inequality and injustice make life so darned hard in the first place.

The Sleepy Hollow Family Almanac

by Kris D’Agostino

The Moretti family has problems: a dying father, a stressed-out mother, two adult sons living at home, a pregnant teenaged daughter, an overdue mortgage. One son, Calvin the protagonist, has left film school, saddled with debt, and works as a teacher’s aide for autistic children. Despite the many characters and sub-plots, Calvin grows to make good decisions while those around him struggle to do the right thing and go on in

the face of daily despair. Though the plot may not seem like fodder for a light-hearted, fun book, it tells readers that humor can be found in the midst of dysfunction and that anyone with the right recipe can make delicious lemonade from those sour lemons.

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