Our Father Short Guide

Our Father by Marilyn French

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Characters

The novel's cast is an ensemble; the four sisters have equally important roles. While at first glimpse each may seem to match a stereotype — the brilliant, overachieving oldest daughter; the cheery, uncomplicated housewife; the prickly Chicana lesbian — within a few pages they become so real and complicated that the stereotypes fall apart. Indeed, this may be the first of French's novels which treats each major female character primarily as an individual person, rather than as a variation of universal Woman.

The author has pulled off a major tour de force of character development.

Each of the four — and the reader's perception of them as well — changes substantially within the two months they spend together in the Upton mansion.

At the book's opening Elizabeth and Mary are very unlikable people. They belittle and quarrel with each other, picking at the other one's sore points.

They question Alex's and Ronalda's right to be there at all. Elizabeth takes pride in her managerial ability and her position as an Assistant Secretary of the Treasury. She is an intellectual snob, disdainful of anyone who has not equaled her achievements. Mary is a social snob. Her self-image is built on her ability to attract men, her circle of wealthy friends, and the houses and baubles she has accumulated. Now in her forties, after four husbands, she is almost broke, and panicking about it.

(Her financial straits come from having been left with "only three million dollars" when a husband died — which may dilute sympathy for her from the typical reader.)

Alex, or Alexandra, feels safely ensconced in her marriage and parenting and volunteer activities. Her mother married again after leaving Stephen Upton, which provided Alex with a more usual middle-class childhood.

Alex lives in Newark, Delaware, where her husband is an engineer at DuPont.

She converted to Judaism when she married David, but otherwise her life has been quite normal. Alex is a nice person, always seeking to muffle conflict and to make others comfortable, but a bit dull and predictable.

Ronalda, or Ronnie, is a mystery to the other women. It is obvious to everyone that she is Stephen's daughter by Noradia Velez, his housekeeper for many years. But Stephen never acknowledged Ronalda. When they first meet, Mary and Elizabeth also deny their relationship to her. At one point in the book, Ronalda broods about which of her traits makes her most alien in Upton space. She concludes that her brown skin and Mexican heritage damn her the most. If she were Stephen's daughter by an unconventional British actress who disdained marriage — even his lesbian illegitimate daughter — she would be acceptable, if marginally so. After her halfsisters accept her, they still do not

understand her outspoken ways or how she could have had a happy girlhood despite her poverty and her father's treatment of her.

The reader's picture of the sisters continually shifts. Proper Elizabeth, who has always disdained women's things for the life of the mind and the public realm, admits to stealing the miniature tea set she envied Mary in childhood. Having to confront her father shows how shaky Alex's normality really is; it also reveals that even she is capable of coldness when pressed. Ronalda, who despises Elizabeth's politics and allegiance to male values, admits that beneath these differences, they are more alike than not. Mary shocks her own daughter by showing real motherly concern and discipline for the first time. The daughter does not react well, but it is clear that with her sisters' moral support, Mary will continue to play the role of a real mother until she gets it right. By the time the book ends, each woman has changed in life-altering ways.

In contrast, the men in Our Father are even less well-drawn than those of French's previous novels. The only emotion Stephen Upton shows during the book's events is rage, although some of his daughters remember his charm when talking with his peers.

Other males are mere shadows. The sisters' various mothers do not fare much better. However, this does not limit the book's narrative power very much. The focus is all on the four women's personalities, memories, and decisions.

Social Concerns

n Our Father, French combines an overall condemnation of patriarchy with a close-up examination of one of its noxious fruits. The four women who gather at Stephen Upton's sickbed share more than the bond of biological sisterhood. Halfway through the novel, they reveal to each other and to the reader that each, in turn, has been sexually molested by their father.

Father-daughter incest has come out of secret recesses and into the spotlight of popular culture during the 1980s and 1990s. It is one of those darkly titillating topics that make instant fodder for talk shows, self-help gurus, and novelists in search of plots. Yet its treatment here is very different from that of most other contemporary novels, which have tended to present incest and other sexual abuse of children as a tragic but individual aberration.

In French's view it is the logical and frequent result of a system which gives inordinate power to men. The congruence of the book's title with that of the Christian prayer is no accident. Early in the book one sister starts meditating upon it, and concludes, ". . . who knows, if the one up there made up the rules we follow down here, [He] may approve of him [Stephen]." Upton is a rich and powerful man, the confidante of Presidents, and in his prime no one would have interfered with him even if the girls had complained. As an eighty-two-year-old man paralyzed by a stroke, he can still terrify his daughters. When they plan to bring him home for convalescence, appalling dreams haunt both Alex and Mary.

Only because he has no sons, and because they are able to convince male lawyers and doctors that Stephen is no longer in his right mind, are the sisters even allowed to make decisions about his care.

Despite the grim premise, Our Father is not as wholly negative about men or about women's hopes within our society as the author's previous books have been. There have been good men and good marriages in some of the sisters' lives. Indeed, the story seems to indict "rich and powerful men" and the system which puts them in charge of others' fate, as much as male privilege per se. The few decent men and happy, egalitarian marriages appear among ordinary middle-class or working-class people. The message seems to be that no good can come from a man — or mind set — that puts money and authority above genuine human connections.

Techniques

Differences, rather than common experiences, are the opening motif of the book. To show them, French uses frequent shifts of point of view, jumping from Mary's to Elizabeth's to Alex's or Ronalda's voice and thoughts within a few pages. This is done so skillfully that when unity and understanding develop between the sisters, it comes as a happy surprise.

Plot is insignificant in Our Father's story line; it is a novel of character and ideology. The revelation of and confrontation over Stephen Upton's acts, which would form the climax of a more conventional novel, occurs just past the halfway point of the book. It is not much of a revelation anyway; his daughters' conversations have already given the reader heavy hints. The author thus plays with and twists the accepted novelistic structure of steadily rising tension to a facedown in the climax, followed by a quick resolution, which ties up loose ends. Some feminists consider this pattern a legacy of male-oriented thinking.

But French goes beyond, to cheat Stephen Upton of being the centerpiece of a novel about his own acts. His presence resembles that of an ugly old piano which is there because no one knows what to do with it. The daughters and the author do not even grant him the courtesy of wondering what made him capable of such monstrous acts, because it is irrelevant. Instead, they focus on getting their lives in order. It is an exquisitely subtle revenge.

Whether French proves the statement that Stephen ruined all their lives is an open question. Certainly Elizabeth's refusal to marry and her lifelong tie to a man with whom she shares intellectual interests but no sex may stem from her father's abuse. But Mary only followed her own mother's example in being a social butterfly and an indifferent mother; many women who are not incest survivors marry and remarry for money. Alex's lost memory is clearly connected with her lost innocence. But what of her pull toward spirituality and social justice, which emerges at the same time as her memories? Ronalda's brutal treatment by Stephen probably shaped her politics, but many lesbians would deny that it shaped her sexual orientation, much less that her life was ruined thereby.

There is one very puzzling scene.

Alex thinks back to a trip that she took with David to Jerusalem. Watching the life of the ancient city go on about her, she was suddenly in another body on one of the surrounding hills, five thousand years ago. It is very vivid; there is no doubt that both Alex and the author regard it as a real experience echoing a past life. The event creates the expectation that Alex, who at that point in the book is casting about for a project, will be inspired to go to Israel to do good works. But no, she goes to El Salvador instead. As proof of Alex's spirituality it seems a bit eccentric. There is no evidence that it foreshadows Alex's presence in a future book. But who knows? It could be just such a signal. It does not seem to fit into the present book very well.

Themes

Despite the grim premise and the repeated assertion that their father's acts ruined each woman's life, the novel's theme is positive. Stephen's many marriages and his deliberate acts to isolate them meant the sisters grew up apart. In the case of Elizabeth and Mary, they knew one another but each was full of envy of the other. Yet when the women meet as adults, their individual, cautious revelations and honest reactions to each other gradually overcome their suspicion. The four have vastly different incomes, lifestyles, and sexual or marital status, the signals by which the outside world most often judges and classifies women. But their bond of blood and shared experiences ultimately leads to mutual love.

Stephen's mechanisms of control: secrecy, rage, isolation, power plays backed with money, are defeated once their objects start talking to one another honestly. His death, once his daughters bluntly confront him as a united group, frees them to grow into the women they should have been all along.

After a dramatic Christmas Day argument in which each woman retreats to her own past values and coping mechanisms, they back off and reevaluate. The book ends with the sisters making plans for going on with their lives. But each woman knows she will never be quite so alone again; she has sisters who can help her get through the rough spots and night terrors. 'Sisterhood is powerful' is thus true literally as well as metaphorically.

Yet calling either sisterhood or selfrevelation the key to the problems of patriarchy would oversimplify the book's theme. Certainly both concepts have been important in the women's movement and its analysis of the ills of society, but at best they are partial, coping strategies. The Upton sisters' way is also eased by the money that Stephen leaves them, money that has given authority without responsibility to males of the family in the past.

In this, her fourth novel, French offers modulated hope for reform.

Individual life changes and wholeness are attainable, although difficult. Social change can only be encouraged through partial, microactions. Alex's and Ronalda's future plans would seem to support this reading. Alex, whose children no longer need her so much, is going to use her money to set up a rural hospital in El Salvador. Ronalda will resume work on her degree in environmental studies, hoping more respect for nature will help make a better world.

Controversy stalks the public discussion of childhood incest, especially the recovered memories issue. French's thematic treatment here does not exactly match the terms of the public debate. The book shows that such incest has cultural and societal roots, going all the way back to Old Testament morality which made an unmarried daughter's sexuality her father's property. This is in opposition to recovered-memories therapy, which finds causes within the individual family and tends to hold other family members

who do not stop the incest equally culpable. The novel illuminates the power imbalances which keep them from doing so.

Yet one of the daughters, Alex, has lost most of her childhood memories.

Alex's mother was also the only one to learn about the incest. She left and removed the little girl from the situation, although in later years she refuses to talk about it. Aside from the memory gaps, however, Alex appears to be the most normal of any of the sisters.

The chain of events is more complex than in the public debate. The novel shows the complexity of the issue well, and at the same time presents a coherent ideology to account for it.

Key Questions

Although Our Father reads easily enough, it is not a book that many people would pick for sheer entertainment. Readers are likely to choose it because of its feminist outlook, its theme of incest, or its author's stature as a best-selling author taken seriously by at least some of the literary establishment. For these reasons, a discussion may draw a very mixed group of readers. The leader may want to consider in advance whether a "personal is political" slant would be workable, and in fact whether he or she is prepared to handle the high emotional pitch that could result.

Most readers will be expecting discussion of the book's feminist subtext as well as pure character and plot analysis. In fact, they are so interwoven that it would be hard to treat the latter elements alone. One fruitful approach might be to discuss it along with one or more novels by other feminist authors. Sue Miller's The Good Mother (1986), for example, also shows its heroine's life as nearly ruined by a powerful male, but with sexual abuse charges used as a weapon against her.

There are no respectable contemporary novels that directly disagree with French's theme about incest; there is only pornography. A nonfiction book that makes a case for continuing male dominance is George Gilder's Men and Marriage (1992). Planners might want to include it, along with one of French's nonfiction volumes, if a discussion aims at equal-time treatment.

1. To what extent do you agree with Elizabeth's statement that their father ruined the lives of all his daughters?

2. Each daughter thinks that, even at the last moment, she would have pulled back from accusations and confrontation if Stephen had shown the least sign of remorse or love. Is this belief plausible, or were they merely saying this to salve their own consciences?

3. Of all the sisters, only Ronalda feels strong, uncomplicated love for her own mother. Yet by most standards her mother had very little happiness in her own life. Is the author trying to say that one is the price of the other? Or is the message more complicated?

4. Both Elizabeth and Mary grew up viewing the world as totally controlled by powerful men like their father. Each coped with it in a different way: Elizabeth by trying to join them, Mary by marrying them. To what extent did they have other choices?

5. Alex, whose mother acted to protect her daughter while the other mothers did not or could not, nevertheless was the one who suffered from lost memories. Is this coincidental, or cause-and-effect?

6. In real life, would four adult sisters from such disparate social levels become and remain as close as these women do? Why or why not?

7. Is Elizabeth right in her belief that no one would have done anything or even believed them if any of the girls had accused their father in childhood?

Would it have been different if he had been a poor man? Would it be different now?

8. At one point Alex tries to stop Elizabeth and Ronalda from arguing, and says: "why, if you want to argue about politics or whatever . . . do you have to attack each other personally!"

This is reminiscent of what some men sometimes say about women: "They get too emotional about everything." Is this what Alex means? Or does she have another reason for saying it?

9. Near the book's end, Ronalda discovers that her mother has saved money out of her small salary, so that Ronnie has an inheritance even though Stephen Upton left her nothing. This allows her to turn down her sisters' offer to share, and saves her pride.

Should she have turned it down? What else does it represent?

10. Stephen is about to change his will because he hates seeing his daughters banded together, especially when he is paralyzed and powerless. Or so they believe, at any rate. To avert this, they convince his lawyer and doctor that he is no longer rational, even though they do not believe it themselves. Do you think they were justified?

Literary Precedents

Our Father falls squarely within the modern feminist tradition which French helped establish in fiction. But the strongest influences and parallels come from much older traditions.

One can hardly read this book without remembering the biblical stories of Lot. Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt because she defied the orders of her husband and a male God. The day before, Lot had been willing to toss his own daughters out to be gang-raped.

Yet God regarded Lot as the only righteous man in Sodom, so he was warned and could escape before the city was destroyed. Later, isolated in a mountain cave, Lot's daughters seduce him so that they can bear children. This did not seem to please God as much, although scholars differ on the intent of this passage. However, the disapproval appears to be because Lot, rather than his daughters, had no choice in the matter. Popular Bible commentary has focused upon whether the sin for which Sodom was destroyed was homosexuality or inhospitality to strangers. By doing so, the antiwoman subtext of the whole tale is almost lost.

Without much effort, one can imagine Stephen Upton as a latter-day Lot. It is hard to find another source which so explicitly supports the linking of patriarchy with the father's rights in his daughters' sexuality.

King Lear (1605) is the other renowned work with echoes in the novel.

True, Lear did not physically or sexually abuse his daughters. His overt flaws are foolishness and susceptibility to flattery. Yet the story also includes the theme of lost innocence, and the dire results of separating power from responsibility. In one conversation Mary refers to Goneril and Regan, Lear's ungrateful older daughters. It is clear that French, a Shakespearean scholar, at least meant for Our Father to stand as a sort of mirror image of Lear, if not to suggest that perhaps all is not as it appears in this famous play.

A Thousand Acres (1991), by Jane Smiley, is a Pulitzer prize-winning novel, set in Iowa, which also explores the latter idea. Smiley believes the usual interpretation of King Lear masks important truths. Each of her novel's characters corresponds to a character in King Lear. The incest motif is treated directly, and the theme that rich, respected men make their own rules also shapes the story. This novel is more subtle and less ideological than is Our Father, but they could be called companion works, two late-twentieth-century variations on Shakespeare's play.

Interestingly, for all its angst, Our Father has a more hopeful conclusion than Smiley's novel, which ends in true tragic fashion with all the principals either dead or with shattered lives.

Some critics have accused French of plotting Our Father with an eye to "hot" fictional trends. This reading seems to overlook both the author's feminist fervor and her ideological framework. Of all the "incest novels" published in recent years, only French's advances a coherent, direct theory about the connection between patriarchy and incest.

Louise Armstrong's nonfiction book, Rocking the Cradle of Sexual Politics: What Happened When Women Said Incest (1994), provides significant backing to French's theory of paternal incest.

Related Titles

Our Father is related to French's other fiction only indirectly, through the view of society and its patriarchal underpinnings which shapes each novel. Her nonfiction works, especially Beyond Power (1986), and The War Against Women (1992) are direct examinations of the same topic.

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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994