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Sharpening Teeth

PARENTS MAY BE, AS PETER USTINOV WROTE, “the bones on which children sharpen their teeth.” Few of us who raise children emerge from the experience unscathed. At the same time, a significant portion of moms and dads do their own tooth sharpening—and the bones they gnaw, their children’s, hold the scars and grow differently because of them.

The fever for memoir having run its course, we might well ask what compels certain writers to shape narratives out of their own lives, and what compels us to read of lives other than the famous or infamous, of lives whose contours rest uncomfortably against our own. Scandal and titillation no longer suffice; having digested memoirs of bestiality, incest, and sadism, we might yawn even at “I Was a Teenaged Cannibal.” We are left, on one hand, with the rationale that memoir provides a unique angle on cultural history. On the other, we may find, in the most honest of memoirs, startling variations on old definitions: of love and family, especially of parents.

The three books under consideration here focus on three different cultural eras during the last century. Francine du Plessix Gray’s *Them*, the longest and most sweeping, takes in the diasporas and resettlings occasioned by two world wars and the constantly shifting Western haut monde. Karen Salyer McElmurray’s *Surrendered Child* picks up in 1960s Kentucky, where loosening mores battle both age-old repression and plain ignorance. And Jeannette Walls’s *The Glass Castle* focuses on the last third of the century and the dark side of American individualism.

More deeply and wrenchingly, however, these memoirs concern parents: those people who stalk our memories long after our own lives have outstripped theirs. Whether he admits it or not, every parent I know fears that his child will spent thousands on adult therapy coping with whatever damage he is currently inflicting.

Them: A Memoir of Parents by Francine du Plessix Gray. New York: Penguin Press. \$29.95 (cloth). *Surrendered Child: A Birth Mother’s Journey* by Karen Salyer McElmurray. Athens: University of Georgia Press. \$29.95 (cloth). *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls. New York: Scribner. \$25.00 (cloth).

At the same time, we each hope that our children will one day want to know something about us, and that we will thereby live on. “Now that you are in my custody, fierce parents,” Francine du Plessix Gray writes in *Them*, “you have become my own docile little children, sandstone soft, every recollection of you to be sculpted and honed according to my whims.”

Gray’s “whims,” fortunately, include a prodigious amount of research and soul-search. Her mother was Tatiana Iacovleff du Plessix, a White Russian *émigrée* to Paris in 1925 who would become an internationally known hat designer and doyenne of New York society. Her stepfather, Alexander Liberman, himself the son of a high-ranking Russian official, fled both the Stalinist purge and his own Jewish background to become a publishing titan in the United States. Her father, Bertrand du Plessix (a lesser character in the book), was a noble albeit insecure French patriot who would be one of the first Free French casualties in the fight against Hitler. Now, these are impressive credentials. Yet on their own, the stories of Tatiana, Alexander, and Bertrand might not merit the reader’s attention. Plenty of accomplished and fascinating characters already enliven the histories of the two world wars and the Russian diaspora. Rather, Gray manages to pull us into the fulcrum of her curiosity, on which turns this tale of parental extravagance and abuse, and of filial loyalty and awe.

We do not come to love these parents, but we do come to see them, as Gray does, in context. Nary a ripple of twentieth-century European history fails to affect Tatiana and Alexander. Tatiana’s beauty, vanity, and sexual coldness have their sources in exile, financial insecurity, and strict upbringing. Alexander’s ambition, snobbishness, and disloyalty hark back to his rootless family’s high hopes, to political modes of survival, to the disruptions and betrayals that put Jews at risk in Europe. Only toward the end of the book do we learn that Francine herself suffers the sting of all these circumstances. This is not a book of self-pity, written though it is by one whose parents, the very day of the family’s arrival in the United States, ship the eleven-year-old child two hundred miles away to a depressed, penurious grandfather she has never met and whose language she does not speak. Rather, the task Gray sets herself is to discover the humanity beneath the large personae. Just as Tatiana and Alex were the sum of their circumstances, she implies, she is the inheritor of their past. At her mother’s funeral, she writes, “From under my ocean of sorrow, amid that brutal sense of severance which is most deeply suffered by daughters, something akin to a sense of gratitude emerged: Dear God, I’ve survived her.”

In surviving, too, Gray manages to restore the richness of the lives from which she's descended. She traces her mother's relationships with her brother, the flamboyant painter Sasha Iacovleff; with the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky; and with the hardheaded, kind Marlene Dietrich. She neatly parallels her father's rise to the top of the Condé Nast publishing empire with the confluence of post-World War II art and fashion in a New York suddenly populated by European sophisticates. She does not entirely escape the "poor little rich girl" trap inevitably laid by her status as the only child of these narcissistic personalities. In relating her own relationship during high school with a younger member of her parents' social set—among whom are "divorcées with shady Latin American lovers, frequently drugged central European nobility"—she notes that, "seeing the hours we kept and the amount of alcohol we consumed, I myself am amazed that I made it out of Spence and into Bryn Mawr." But as Francine matures, she discovers a truth that, more than such glib summary of a spoiled life, takes the bloom off the rose: her mother, that paragon of energy, was for most of her adult life a drug addict, her increasing dosages of Benzedrine and, later, alcohol and Demerol, abetted by her husband's desire to maintain her dependence on him. Her ending is sordid; his, bitter. Gray gamely tries to rescue her tale in a final epilogue suffused with love, but it is a love we watch and pity and cannot share.

Karen Salyer McElmurray is hardly so forgiving of her parents. At the time of writing she is younger than Gray, her parents still living. More to the point, *Surrendered Child* is about her own parenting—really its failure—and she cannot excavate its roots without exposing the still-raw emotions she has about the people who bore and tried to nurture her.

"Nothing but a baby, her own self," a woman says of McElmurray when in 1973, just turned sixteen, she arrives at the hospital to give birth. This part of the story, its nominal subject, is not so complicated. A pair of teenagers make love, conceive, reluctantly marry, give the child up, and go their separate ways into an adulthood haunted by the baby's absence. To McElmurray's credit, she dwells little on this soap-opera chain of events. Rather, she focuses on the union of her Kentucky parents—a pair as unlike Tatiana and Alexander Liberman as can be imagined—and on the family and social influences that made them as incompetent as the Libermans to bring up a daughter.

McElmurray's tale skips around in time, chronology interrupted by italicized sections that rehearse scenes and images she has been unable to escape. Only grad-

ually does the story of her mother—a fearful, religious, provincial daughter of superstitious Appalachian parents—come clear. “From her eastern-Kentucky world,” McElmurray writes, “she landed in Kansas, wife to an Air Force boy who once liked racier women with names like Goldie. A boy who liked a normal amount of clutter, a normal share of intimacy.” Clutter and intimacy are her mother’s demons, cleanliness and untouchability her shields against a godless, rapacious world. Reestablished in Kentucky, she tries to control, first her husband, then her daughter. Eating peanut butter and crackers for lunch, Karen must touch neither cracker nor peanut butter. Even at twelve, she must be bathed by her mother, and her post-ablution body inspected and wiped for germs. The world outside the home was “that unclean place,” and the most unclean force in it was men.

Naturally, Karen begins to collude with her father, and when he leaves her mother, she goes with him. Her father, after all, has no objection to her wearing peasant dresses and moccasins, to her eating in the living room, to her having a boyfriend. In love himself, he fails to notice how his daughter is slowly floating away on a current of sex and drugs. Thus, though she runs away at sixteen from her father and the father of her unborn child, Karen is not escaping paternal ire so much as attempting to escape the body that her mother has taught her is “nasty,” its needs and operations unmentionable. She spends most of her pregnancy with strangers, hippies in Columbia, Missouri, until she is found and returned to enter a quick, sad marriage and undergo the birth that will yield the son she forfeits.

That surrender feels not only heartbreaking but--and here lies the crux of McElmurray’s urge to write—avoidable. Though her mother knows nothing of the pregnancy or its issue, her father is there, in the hospital, begging his daughter not to send her son to strangers but to let him take on the burden. For her repeated “No,” McElmurray supplies reasons: “The arrogance of a teenaged girl. The judgment of a soon-to-be woman who could not relegate her son’s life to the very past she had just managed to escape.” But the real achievement of this memoir lies in the failure of reasons to account fully for actions. If McElmurray could ever explain completely how she gave up her son, she might finally be able to relinquish the guilt of having done so. But her search provides context, not excuses; and the responsibility of her action remains with her and sets the course of her life.

By the end of the book, McElmurray’s son has tracked her down, and there has been a reconciliation that was clearly unanticipated when she began this project. Even this happy outcome, however, is ambiguous, represented unsentimentally: “He is a young man on the threshold of the world and I am a woman who still

longs to hold my son on the day he was born,” she writes; and the reader might predict more painful growth to come. Yet the image that persists, however unexpected and joyous may be this mother-son reunion, is the one McElmurray paints after a visit home when she has tried and failed to tell her own mother that she has a grandson. “She will sleep on her back,” she says of this sad, frightened woman, “hands folded across her chest, covers neat, unkicked, this sleep an inconvenience, a temporary stay against wakefulness.”

The word McElmurray’s mother trusts least is *love*, and it is love that most astonishes us in these published remembrances of parents who so utterly fail the test of parenting. Most dismal of all, surely, are the pair of self-absorbed, dislocated souls who spawn Jeannette Walls and her three siblings in the last third of the twentieth century. If *Them* is organized like history, with colorful personalities and watershed events marching steadily from the past toward the present, and *Surrendered Child* is organized like a dream, with dislocated moments interrupting the struggle for narrative coherence, then *The Glass Castle* is organized like a snapshot album. At first, the reader suspects the authenticity of some of the photos in this grotesque, carnivalesque collection. Eventually, by sheer accretion of evidence, Walls makes her case.

“Where are we going, Dad?” the young Jeannette asks her father. His answer—“Wherever we end up”—is the family’s mantra for the first fifteen years of her life. Her parents are adventure seekers whose idea of adventure means hightailing out of Phoenix, Arizona, in a junky car, driving until the car breaks down, then leaving it (and all their possessions) to walk eighty miles through the desert with four children. It means subsisting in a broken-down shack in Welch, West Virginia, with no plumbing and eventually no electricity, while the roof gradually caves in and the porch rots and the children root through garbage for food while their mother hoards chocolate. It means spending what little money Rex and Rose Mary Walls manage occasionally to bring in on Rex’s booze and Rose Mary’s art supplies. It means admiring buck-toothed Jeannette’s attempt at homemade braces.

The Glass Castle shocks at every turn, to the point where a reader fears she is continuing for the shock value alone. Inevitably, we reach the point that the book anticipates from earlier snapshots—of the family’s living down the street from a bordello, of the parents’ leaving the front door open “to let the air circulate” until Jeannette’s younger sister is molested in her bed. At thirteen, Jeannette obediently dresses up and follows her father to a West Virginia bar where he sends her upstairs with a coal miner while he hustles pool money. By then, Jeannette is a tough

cookie and escapes her dad's attempt to pimp her; by then, also, we are not only believing every detail of every snapshot but suspecting that worse abominations lie in the shadows.

Yet Walls's memoir, with its flat tone and episodic punch, has a point. More than once, social workers sniff out this neglectful family. Only by sheer grit do Jeannette and her siblings escape in their teens, and we are left suspecting that her younger sister, Maureen, has fallen prey to mental disorders in part brought on by years of abuse. And Jeannette, as a young adult, appears aware that her autonomy is as much a matter of choice as her parents' destitution. When a Barnard professor suggests to her that cuts in social programs and the failure to create economic opportunity may have led to the current crisis in homelessness, Jeannette hesitantly responds that "maybe sometimes people get the lives they want." With their heedless narcissism and self-gratification, Walls's parents are the darkest side of the "Me Generation." Ironically, Walls learns as an adult that even her father's alcoholism and her mother's self-indulgence fail to account for the penury of her upbringing. While her children subsisted on margarine and dog food, Rose Mary Walls held on to a million dollars' worth of land in Texas—for sentimental reasons.

This judgment is far more damning than either McElmurray's or Gray's assessment of their parents. How surprising it is, then, that in the end, Jeannette Walls's love, especially for her reckless father, seems even more intense than theirs. Having watched her father die of a heart attack in an emergency room, she writes, "He'd have wanted to be in the wild somewhere. . . . I had this crazy urge to scoop him up in my arms and charge through the doors." Up to now, the narrator—like the character of Jeannette she creates—has possessed a moral strength that has carried her through re-creating her family of origin's starvation, physical abuse, and shame. But at this point, the narrative's end, I worry for her.

Oscar Wilde wrote, "Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them." We who read these memoirs do so because they echo that love, which we all have felt, and they hover somewhere in the valley between judgment and forgiveness. Written as they are by adults whose journeys are not yet over, they do not so much sum up a life as articulate a stage within it. The memoir itself may be part of the act of forgiveness—for while our parents move on, bearing the scars we give them and leaving their own on us, the book remains. These books are eloquent testimonies of adults who survived childhood trauma of their parents' making—three very different models for how to hang onto and how to let go of the past.