

# The Sproul Disaster

by Richard Elman

## Gerhardt's Children

by Jerrold Mundis. 305 pp. Atheneum, \$9.95

**N**ovels about happy families are all alike; every unhappy family novel is unhappy in its own way: *Gerhardt's Children*, for example, rummages among the miseries of four successive immigrant German Catholic generations, but its uniqueness lies in its ruminative inventory of the Sproul family conducted by Garvin, of the fourth generation, a narrator who is also a professional novelist.

When he writes about his own life Garvin seems accurate, well-meaning, and restrained; but when he conducts his inquest into the legacy of family hates he seems more in awe, almost hypnotized by so much going so wrong, and his prose becomes stiff and numb.

Garvin recalls family history while his stepsister Nora is dying of breast cancer. He psychologizes about the imposition of the sense of sin and guilt among Catholics and the awakening of prurience, and how early circumstances can set limitations on hope. He is no easygoing nostalgist; he is acute and sensitive to the grasping authoritarianism of his great-grandmother, to her son Gerhardt's plodding climb toward business success and his nearsighted stumble toward eventual failure. He notes the destructive effects of all this on Gerhardt's children, including his own mother, and the accumulated toll on his own generation of grandchildren.

*Gerhardt's Children* is painful to read, at times explicit to the point of tediousness, often morbid, the novelistic materials of dramatic scene and important history turning again and again toward humiliation, pain, feuds, threats, coercions, genetic misunderstandings, birth injuries, and terrible abandonments, as well as to the blandishments of love that conceal disappointment. There are, of course, tenderesses exchanged—chiefly on sick beds or death beds—and moments of intimacy and poignancy, but very little joy or celebration. Not much fun for the Sprouls, or for anybody reading about them.

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How does anybody ever survive to become a novelist? Or is being a writer the reward reserved for those who have been too squeamish to go on being just striving participants in the family myth? Exposing my own family in a novel was my most powerful childhood threat against those who instilled in me the heavy grudge of family lore and the day-to-day miseries of being a brother, a son, a grandchild, a nephew. In *Gerhardt's Children*, on the other hand, Garvin comes to novel writing as part of the process of coming to manhood; he is certainly the most intelligent and mature member of the Sproul disaster, and possibly the most sympathetically drawn. No mere tattletale, he reaches out to his dying sister, instructs his mother not to feel rejected by her stepdaughter's suffering rages, sees through the destructive pretensions of his uncles and aunts, manages to love his second wife and his children, and is so kind and whole, so careful and tolerant of this ambulatory nightmare, and so just—while always maintaining the contact with his family—that I wondered how anybody who could be so involved with so much self-pity, cruelty, duplicity, and greed could have emerged so unscathed. Jerrold

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Mundis (who has written other novels under pseudonyms) has left out so much of the process of getting over family life in his obviously autobiographical projection of Garvin that we are left, from the barest of hints along the way, with some suggestion that there might be a truly miraculous tale of psychotherapy yet to be presented. Or are we to believe that all one needs to overcome such a cast of hard-bitten and resentful martyrs is to be properly mated and bedded down?

Despite some arbitrary and meandering storytelling, much of *Gerhardt's Children* is vivid, moving, exact, and

exacting, with a very strong sense of decades past, places lived in, and the passage of time. It must have been even more painful for Mundis than it was for this reader to lend himself and steep himself and project himself (in Henry James's words) into so much unhappiness, and if he has, indeed, come out the better for it, hurrah for him that out of so much corporate suffering someone was redeemed. If his narrator's well-being is just as fictive as the particular familial miseries he has recorded here, that is just another typical paradox of the autobiographical novel: for one is always

most candid about those from whom one has been separated by a generation or two, and most putative and hypothesizing about the person one would like to believe one has become.

Even our most extraordinary chronicler of German-American family experience, Henry Miller, sometimes makes his compassion functional to his anger for having grown up amid the cold comforts of Bushwick, Brooklyn, and for returning there after many years of Bohemian exile in time to witness the slow dying of his family. Jerrold Mundis, who lacks Miller's humor and sarcasm though he seems

to be of a more judicious temperament, is most effective when he yields that judicious declaiming persona to the ongoing action and becomes engrossed in the dying of Nora and her reconciliation with her stepmother. A kind of fragmentary poetry overtakes the essayistic paragraphs and distanced sententiousness, a surrender to pain itself: this litany represents it as a coming together, a closeness, all that was ever said or left unsaid between a mother and her daughter, through both lifetimes of hurts, and momentary intimacies, and almost accidental pleasures. □