

BOOKS

[*Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce*, Elizabeth Marquardt, Crown, 288 pages]

Broken Homes, Broken Children

By Mary Eberstadt

SPY SUPERNOVELIST John le Carré, as keen a psychologist as any, once captured in a sentence a simple yet profound fact of life. “As a child of a broken home,” he wrote of a character in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, the boy “was a natural watcher.”

Obvious though it may be to anyone with first-hand experience, this insight—that children of broken homes are somehow different and that this difference includes but is not limited to a unique wariness toward the outside world—remains ferociously resisted in sociology both academic and popular. And not only there. At a time when hardly an extended family in the country is without broken branches somewhere on the tree, and when the going piety among sophisticates is that a family is whatever two or more consenting adults in possession of a child say it is, practically no one wants to ask the exceedingly unwelcome question of what effect, if any, widespread divorce in particular might be having on kids.

Even so, some scholars have valiantly asked and answered just that. Thanks to the groundbreaking work of those willing to buck resistance to the bad news—Judith Wallerstein, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Sarah MacLanahan, Gary Sandefur, David Blankenhorn, Maggie Gallagher, Linda Waite, and others—an empirical record of the damages of broken homes has been available for some time now, welcome or not. Best-known among this scholarship is Wallerstein’s unique

25-year study, summarized in *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, which followed 131 children at intervals into adulthood.

Contrary to what almost all recognized authorities had been saying about divorce and its impact on children, what Wallerstein and her team found was exactly what no one wanted to see: widespread evidence of ongoing damage and difference. “Divorce,” as she summarized a quarter-century of research in the introduction to that book,

is a life-transforming experience. After divorce, childhood is different. Adolescence is different. Adulthood—with the decision to marry or not and have children or not—is different. Whether the final outcome is good or bad, the whole trajectory of an individual’s life is profoundly altered by the divorce experience.

This verdict—the social-science version of le Carré’s literary filipp—is now thoroughly vindicated by Elizabeth Marquardt’s bracing and important new book, *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce*. Based on a random survey of 1,500 women and men aged 18-35, as well as 70 in-depth interviews within that group, Marquardt and co-researcher Norval Glenn have delivered an empirical record that makes the appendices alone reason enough to study this book. In them one finds the fascinating differences of this random sample of young adults—half from divorced families and half from intact—manifest themselves repeatedly in the course of 125 probing survey questions.

Even so, the significance of this book goes deeper than its empirical contribution. In a bold move that will doubtless launch a thousand complaining missives from her fellow sociologists, Marquardt frames her discussion of these results in the first person, weaving her own personal story as a child of divorced parents in and out of the text. The polemical result ranges from effective to devastating. As a result, *Between Two*

Worlds achieves not only a breakthrough in empiricism but also in the quality most lacking elsewhere in current sociology: empathy for the children and former children of these homes.

Just how different is the difference that Marquardt and Glenn turn up between their samples? Begin with a few practicalities—say, whether the family operates as a center of gravity or not. For example, 32 percent of children of divorce say their family was not in the habit of sharing a daily meal—compared to 8 percent of the children of intact homes. Almost two-thirds of the divorced sample reports that “it was stressful in my family,” compared to 25 percent of the intact sample. Only one-third of the divorced sample can strongly agree with the statement “children were at the center of my family”—as opposed to 63 percent of the intact sample. Many more examples confirm the perhaps unsurprising point: broken homes have less time and room for kids than those that are intact.

Then there are the more nebulous but nevertheless striking differences in outlook. Wallerstein had perspicaciously cited as common among her subjects “the fear that disaster was always waiting to strike without warning.” This apprehensiveness is also confirmed by the subjects in *Between Two Worlds*. Simply put, the children of broken homes feel less protected and more embattled than their peers—an inner vulnerability that appears over and over in the gaps between the two samples. For example, although 70 percent of the divorced sample could report, “I generally felt emotionally safe,” this compares to 93 percent of the kids from intact homes. Numerous of Marquardt’s subjects—like the author herself—report a generalized apprehensiveness and dread of the world lasting well into adulthood. As one puts it and is echoed by others, “I always felt like I was watching out for something to go wrong. Not that I thought I was going to die or anything like that. But I always felt like things were lurking around corners.”

In another finding certain to resonate with readers who share her background, Marquardt also reports that many of her respondents believe themselves prematurely aged compared to their peers. Once again, it is the continuing disparities in the sample that clinch the point. Some 58 percent of the divorced sample agreed with the statement, "I always felt like an adult, even when I was a little kid"—whereas only 37 percent of the intact sample expressed similar sad precocity. Likewise, over twice as many divorced children, almost 30 percent, report that they felt "too responsible" for taking care of a sibling, versus a mere 12.7 percent of the intact sample.

Among the most interesting results have to do with a subject that most contemporary sociologists have barely even thought to touch: the relationship between divorce and subsequent religious beliefs. At the outset of a chapter titled "Child-Sized Old Souls," the author notes that one of the study's major findings came as a surprise—the "strong connection between children of divorce and belief in God." That much established, however, the rest of the story connecting divorce to religion is exceedingly complicated, and makes for some of the most thought-provoking reading in the book.

"THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A GOOD DIVORCE," MARQUARDT SAYS IN SUMMARY OF HER RESEARCH, AND SHE IS RIGHT.

The fundamental and fascinating problem uncovered here by the Marquardt/Glenn survey is that, like it or not, the Judeo-Christian tradition has anthropomorphized the Deity in one particular way: by analogy to a wise, protective, loving, ever-present male parent. The fact that the vast majority of children of divorce do not associate those adjectives with their male biological parent makes for elemental, ongoing confusion and heartache well-documented via numerous telling quotes. At one point, for example, Marquardt asks her subjects to reflect on the idea of God as a parent, elaborating of one:

Will was mystified by the question. He had been angry at his father for years because of the way he treated Will's mother. When I asked Will if god is like a father or parent he looked puzzled. 'Yeah, I think a father is somebody who is your last string of hope,' he said slowly. 'He'll watch over you, make sure everything is going to be okay.' Then his voice faltered and he looked down at his hands in his lap. 'I'm drawing a blank,' he said. 'I'm just drawing a blank.'

Nor are even the "best" divorces immune to raising the most fundamental questions of identity. Says one woman whose Catholic parents had their marriage annulled, meaning theologically that it never existed: "That's something I don't think I've really come to grips with . . . I said, 'How can I not exist? If the marriage didn't exist, who am I? What am I?'"

In sum, *Between Two Worlds* confirms what seasoned observers of human nature will already know—that the children of broken homes do indeed "wear a mantle of seriousness and vigilance even today that sets them apart from their peers." To acknowledge as

much is not to demonize divorced parents. Many undertake their split under duress and in anguish, and some moreover find themselves separated from their child or spouse against their will. As Marquardt also documents, their children love them for the most part wherever they are—and many also go on to love stepparents and half-siblings and others brought into their lives in the wake of the breakup.

To insist on the legitimacy of the child's point of view is not to point a finger at the parents but rather to observe something else—that the tragedy of a divided family is no zero-

sum game. Of course critics will resist Marquardt's work the same way many did Wallerstein's—by complaining about the sample size and other methodological points, by arguing that correlation does not prove causality, and by continuing with the same kind of happy talk ("You're lucky—you have *two* homes!") that has helped to make an inner emotional hash of so many current and former children who know otherwise.

Moreover, it is a sure and sad fact of life that many of the people who ought to read this book will not have the personal stomach to do it. There are parents who do not want to hear the bad news about what they might be doing to their kids. There are policymakers who do not want any potential voters—meaning adults—to think badly of them for making divorce harder to get or for otherwise trying to rig incentives in favor of the natural family. And of course there are the activists now working hard to create even more of the sad world plumbed in such detail here—homes in which children are deprived of a mother or a father, all the while they are told that it's really all to the good.

Whatever its origin, the deep desire that some of us adults will feel to resist the message of this book is trumped by the authentic young voices of those who witness otherwise. "There is no such thing as a good divorce," Marquardt says in summary of her research, and she is right. At some point, we just have to be able to say that a broken home is a terrible thing. At some point, we just have to acknowledge that the absence of a biological parent for any reason—let alone in principle—is not only a fact of life, but also a tragedy from almost any child's point of view. Thanks to Elizabeth Marquardt's new book, we may just have taken a step forward on both counts. ■

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[*The Awful End of Prince William the Silent: The First Assassination of a Head of State With a Handgun*, Lisa Jardine, HarperCollins, 144 pages]

The Bullets Are Working

"I remember thinking, 'The bullets are working.' I think I felt a little regret that they were working."

—Mark David Chapman after killing John Lennon

ON THE SAME DAY—July 10, 1584, in Delft, Holland—William the Silent, the architect of Dutch independence, died as a man and was reborn as a myth. Whig historians, above all John L. Motley in *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* (1856), hailed William as not merely a Protestant hero but *the* Protestant hero; the man who first weakened imperial Spain's tyranny; "first in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen"; and, better still, the *de facto* inventor of nationalism, which, as every Whig historian (and Balkan terrorist and English soccer-hoodlum and Hutu machete-wielder) knows, is A Good Thing.

The reaction against such hagiography came with a vehement Hispanophile, W.T. Walsh. In his 1937 life of William's arch-foe Philip II of Spain, Walsh emphasized inconvenient facts about William that Whigs ignored: notably his talent for intrigue, the sustained dirtiness of his propagandistic fighting, and his refusal to abandon Catholicism until the moment when a change of religion suited his interests. Yet Walsh, while more often right than wrong, so overstated his case—1937 was hardly the best possible year for calm thought about Spanish administration—as to make readers ask: if William had been such a soulless, blatantly two-faced creep, how did he inspire followers at all, let alone create a political movement formidable enough to threaten Habsburg sovereignty?

At any rate, later historians—Henry Kamen, Geoffrey Parker, and Sir Charles Petrie are three prominent names—have judiciously discarded both Walsh's wilder rhetorical excess and the Whigs' fairytale, thereby enabling us to appreciate William's true character. To this august list can now be added Lisa Jardine, most famous for her analyses of Erasmus and Francis Bacon. Neither Sir Galahad nor Beelzebub, William is best comprehended as an impressive, crafty politician who, dealt a poor political hand, played it with more skill than several of his contemporaries—including Philip's half-brother Don John of Austria—ever managed even after receiving every court card in the pack.

Why exactly had William's hand been so poor, compared with the gifts that Don John dissipated? Because both temperament and early circumstance ill equipped William with the requirements for a national leader. As a wealthy, cosmopolitan, fairly feckless aristocrat—who took his main title, the Principality of Orange, from a town in southern France—he acquired his first European prominence when 22 years old, in 1555. The occasion: Charles V's ceremonial abandonment of the emperor's role. Prematurely aged, Charles trusted William enough to lean on his arm in Brussels' palace before and during the abdication ceremony.

William earned his nickname "the Silent" through a prudence not natural but tactical. Amid doctrinal warfare he stood out during his youth, as a state councilor in the Netherlands, for his doctrinal vagueness. When he allied himself with protests against Spain's introduction of its Inquisition into the Low Countries, he operated through regional particularism rather than through religious conviction. After all, the Low Countries already possessed an Inquisition, "more rigorous"—as Philip himself said—"than the one here."

Maladroit overreaction by Philip, and to a lesser extent by his generalissimo, the Duke of Alba, did more than any other single process to drive William into permanent political opposition and

thence into discarding the Roman faith's observances altogether—though his marriage to a princess from anti-Habsburg Saxony also helped. Philip ordered in 1568, and Alba failed to prevent, the beheading of two Catholic nobles periodically associated with William: Count Egmont—of Beethoven overture fame—and Count Hornes. Ferocious drum-rolls thundered forth as the victims approached the block, to drown out whatever last speeches they might utter. You can still see, in Brussels's main square, a plaque commemorating the double execution. This blunder gravely damaged centrist Catholic hopes of some confederate autonomy within either a Spanish or a Dutch Calvinist orbit. Thereafter, local Catholic moderates found themselves constituting a largely ineffectual third force caught between Spanish rule and the Calvinists, whom William alternately thwarted and defended.

The conflict's greatest puzzle is whether Spain could have won it, had Philip, always better esteemed by commoners than by the upper classes, visited the Netherlands in person. A later Spanish sovereign, Philip V, maintained that his predecessor's stay-at-home policy had been madness: "If I lose territories, it shall not be for that reason." Probably Philip V's assessment was correct. In 16th-century Europe, rebels who howled to the moon against a king's advisers usually refrained from attacking the king himself.

What remains certain is that the war's first stages—William's initial defeats, followed by cleverly improvised successes; Spain's military revival under Don John and, more lastingly, Philip's nephew the Duke of Parma; William's own attempts, at times vindicated, to keep local Catholics partly on side by ruling via Catholic surrogates like France's Duke of Anjou—not only defy epitomizing in a mere article but belong rather to the Low Countries' history than to William's own. Hostilities continued on and off—a fact worth remembering by modern believers in military "cakewalks"—for 80 years.