

An account of the family through the ages

Toronto writer offers up a collection of snaps taken from every possible angle – not all of them pretty

All in the Family
A Cultural History of Family Life
By Suanne Kelman
Viking, 354 pp, \$32

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The family is an impossibly rich and variable subject. Each of us, whether we wish it or not, are shaped by the family we grew up in and the family, or lack thereof, that we form later in life. Our relationships with our families are responsible for many of the most defining moments throughout our lives: the joys that we remember most fondly (the birth of a child, for example), the sorrows that most disturb us (the death of a parent), the tribulations that we work or suffer through, sometimes endlessly (a distressed sibling that never seems able to find his or her place in the world).

Suane Kelman, freelance writer and professor of journalism at Ryerson Polytechnic University in Toronto, has taken this abundant topic and documented some of its historical and biological curiosities. She admits in her introduction that "no one book on the family can hope to glance at the millions of questions we now know enough to ask." But she does try. The result is a quick two-step through the highs, lows and vagaries of a very quirky institution, including the various roles fathers have had through the ages, the extended family vs. the nuclear family, and the gradual move from patriarchy to romance.

We have, as it turns out, been anything but consistent when it comes to raising children, showing respect for our partners, or establishing personal bonds that would separate us from those fleeting couplings found most often in the animal kingdom. Kelman relates some of the more chilling examples of human brutishness. The Code of Hammurabi, for example, dictated that if a man killed a girl, his own daughter had to die in recompense. Early Roman records indicate that

women could be put to death for drinking wine and that a woman could prevent pregnancy by wearing the liver of a cat in a tube on the left foot. In the Middle Ages, the disciplining of children included gouging out eyes, lopping off ears or ripping out of the tongue. In Medieval Europe, betrothal to a 7-year-old was not out of the question. The Tiwi people on Melville Island off the north coast of Australia arrange marriages even before the conception of the future bride and groom. And in Victorian London, one of the most culturally advanced cities of its time, an estimated 5,000 child prostitutes worked the streets.

We should also not forget that Catholic priests were allowed to marry until the 11th century; that Shakers, who insisted on celibacy, are no longer with us; and that 84 per cent of recorded cultures have permitted men to have more than one wife or female mate at one time.

Our own age is hardly more enlightened: in India, about 20,000 women a year die from illegal abortions and many more than that are disabled from infections from botched abortions; two out of every five children in the U.S. live without a father; in Islamic countries, a 7-year-old boy has every right to discipline his mother by preventing her from, for example, taking classes; and infanticide is all too common a story on the nightly news (remember the notorious story of Susan Smith, the South Carolina mother who, in the fall of 1994, drowned



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her two children rather than lose her lover; and in Montreal last week, Luis Ortiz was charged with killing his three children, ages 3½ to 14).

This wealth of information comes from Kelman's formidable research. The book is laden with 35 pages of endnotes and an eight-page bibliography. Kelman has done her homework. The unfortunate part is that the book sometimes

reads like a recitation of the work of other researchers, such as Philippe Ariès and his seminal work on childhood, the anthropological studies of Colin Turnbull and Bronislaw Malinowski, and others from disparate fields, including Germaine Greer, Barbara Ehrenreich and Jane Goodall.

Kelman has also used other sources, including TV shows, Hollywood movies, discussions with her friends and colleagues, and self-help books as a way of highlighting the many ways that we see ourselves and our human interactions.

The purpose of all this data collection is to demonstrate that "family life is imperfect and difficult everywhere, all the time," as Kelman says in her concluding comments. Primarily concerned with outlining the multitudinous ways we have formed and sometimes destroyed families, Kelman sparingly provides her own gloss and opinions. She is particularly hard, and rightly so, on male-centred families and the resulting abuse of women through the ages. She is also disturbed by our seeming obsession with happiness. As she

says, "I wish that Westerners would renounce their delusion that they can be happy all the time, and learn to live with the less-than-perfect families they have."

The book is not really a cultural history of family life so much as a collection of family snapshots taken from a vast assortment of angles and permutations. As a journalist, Kelman is most comfortable with gathering and presenting information. I would have liked her to digest more fully and critique more pointedly the vast reading she has done. History, we know, is not objective. Kelman should have felt more free to follow her own instincts rather than endlessly jump from one curious snippet to the next. Her chapters on church and state, for example, could have provided more substantial analysis of the control those institutions have often had over families and sex.

The great strength of the book is Kelman's expansive digging into a vast body of historical, anthropological and psychological research undertaken by others. Her breezy and informal tone helps to provide for most readers a synopsis of sometimes arcane or rarified work. She has also sprinkled throughout the text excerpts from the various radio documentaries that she has prepared over the years. Other writers may not have attempted such a boundless task. That Kelman has successfully harnessed such an unwieldy glut of information and strange, all-too-human delusions throughout the ages is a mark of her journalistic objectivity and tenaciousness.

Bertrand Russell once said that "of all the institutions that have come down to us from the past none is in the present day so disorganized as the family." Kelman has well documented this disorganization but I would have been more intrigued by the book had it recounted less often and analyzed more deeply.

❖ *Peter O'Brien is a Toronto editor and writer. He has a wife, a young daughter, 9 brothers and sisters, 12 step-brothers and step-sisters, and 50 or so nieces and nephews.*