

A 'boomlet' in American letters

The Return of the Family

By James Reston, Jr.

LAST FALL, while walking with me across the campus in Chapel Hill, Reynolds Price, a friend of long standing, remarked that the family novel was undergoing a "boomlet" in American letters, and that such books were being written by authors in their late 30's and early 40's, when a true appreciation of the family develops.

The mood of the country seems right for this resurgence. Ten years of disruption within the American family drove out any sentimentality about roots, but it was a temporary cessation, temporary as the generations go. Indeed, that upstart '60's generation, whose members are now approaching their middle 30's, may roar back to basic values with ferocity. This preoccupation with the family is evident not only in books but throughout popular culture—witness the family television shows.

Three Generations

In Price's *Surface of the Earth* (Atheneum, 491 pages, \$10.95) and Larry Woiwode's *Beyond the Bedroom Wall* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 619 pages, \$12.50) are two examples of younger, but mature authors coming to their big book with family novels.

Both cover three generations of their respective families: Woiwode's

Commentary: Recent Fiction

Neumillers in North Dakota, Minnesota, and Illinois, and Price's Mayfields in Virginia and North Carolina. Both require of their readers a basic interest in the way families falter, split, reunite, endure.

These big books are not filled with dramatic tension. The characters do not possess weird or picaresque qualities intended to grab the reader in the first eight pages. The enjoyment of them comes from finding a comfortable chair and inviting a transportation into the intimate company of distant people in distant times and places. The violence or the love that these kinfolk bestow on one another comes in subtle, oblique ways. But if the transgressions seem small, the hurt can be deep, the blame long lasting, the remorse undisappearing and dangerous.

In *Surface of the Earth*, for example, Eva Kendal runs away in 1903 with Forrest Mayfield without her family's consent, and her family cuts her adrift without a word. When Eva bears a child and nearly dies after birth, she writes her parents, longing to be taken back, telling her mother that, had the child been a girl, she would have named it after her moth-

er. Possessed by remorse and guilt, her mother drinks a lye solution and dies. Six months later, Eva, her health returning, says to Forrest:

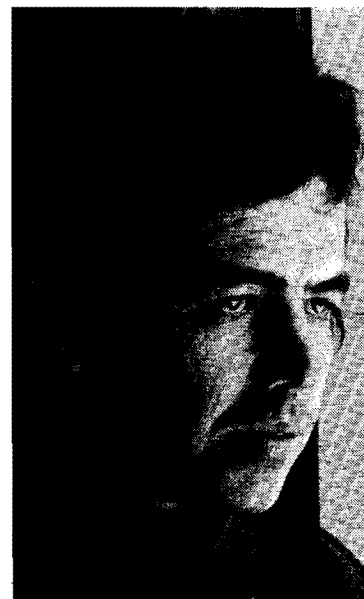
"I married you. I left my family in cruelty and followed you. I don't blame you. I thought it was my wish. I took a baby from you and nursed it inside of me through nine long months till it tried to kill me. I made a human like you'd make a shed, a good tight shed that will turn wind and water. I killed my mother. I came back here to visit the remnants of my family for pardon. . . ."

Blood and Genes

For Eva, the family is more important than her marriage—it's a shame she had to choose—and she lives apart from Forrest from then on. Blood and genes and the past make the Mayfields what they are.

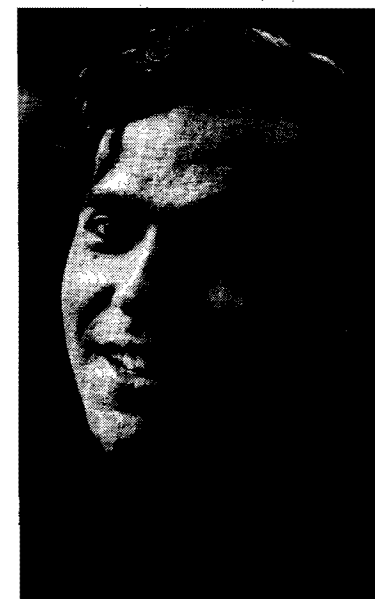
To become thoroughly engrossed in the family novel, one must be interested in these themes: marriages, births, funerals, sexual encounters, and even perversions; religion, ambition, reputation, manners. The critics who complain about lack of movement, or "old fashionedness," or who use that old cliché—"who are these characters and why should we care about them?"—are commenting on themselves, not on the books.

To gain any true picture of an



MC CANDLESS

Larry Woiwode



JOHN MENAPACE

Reynolds Price

American family over a succession of generations requires a deliberateness of pace, a resort to the "old fashioned" devices of the letter or the diary (which are used deftly in these two novels), a leisurely drawing of those scenes that are so important to family life. One is inclined to ask what is this virtue called "modern."

If one might expect a long family novel from Reynolds Price, who falls easily within the tradition of Southern writing, a long family novel out of North Dakota is a surprise. For in Southern writing, the family dominates. As John Updike wrote recently about another family novel just published, *Searching for Caleb* (Knopf): "She [the author, Anne Tyler, who has Southern roots] does apparently accept the belief, extinct save in the South, that families are absolutely, intrinsically interesting. Are they?"

The South shares less in the mobility and disparateness of the usual American family. If Southerners move away from the South, their roots seem to entwine them at a distance, and if those Southerners are writers, like Willie Morris, Truman Capote, or Tom Wicker, the South is invariably their material.

It would seem impossible that the Mayfields could move out of North Carolina, as the Neumillers move out of North Dakota, simply because the head of the house was not "getting ahead."

Sins Past and Present

The preoccupation with the past—not the historical past that everyone talks about but the past of grandparents and aunts—consumes the characters in *Surface of the Earth*. The Mayfield family suffocates itself in its intrigue with the shortcomings and sins of its members, past and present. The novel thereby operates totally on the emotional level, devoid of any extensive picture of the characters outside the family setting.

The contrast to Woiwode's *Beyond the Bedroom Wall* is sharp. Charles Neumiller, as he prepares his immigrant father for burial in the harsh ground of the family farm—a

marvelous scene—is devoid of any sentimentality about his upbringing: "Why was it that he so seldom thought of his past? He never thought of it."

And yet there is a return to roots at the end of the novel. Charles Neumiller, who has abandoned the bleak wastes of the Plains for the excitements and pretensions of the poet's life in Greenwich Village, returns to the Midwest, and the book ends with a touching conversation with Martin Neumiller, Charles's father.

'All Those Empty Spaces'

"All I have to look forward to is retirement," Martin says. "Then I can get a few acres with a house, or a small farm maybe, maybe even in North Dakota. Then again, maybe I wouldn't like it there any more—who can say? All those empty spaces with nothing but a pair of railroad tracks stretched out as straight as a string. None of my friends where they used to live and the country itself has changed so, with so many trees and new sloughs and small lakes, you'd hardly recognize the place. . . ."

"I've got my retirement to look forward to and the grandchildren you kids will have. I want to watch them grow up. That's enough. The rest of it, all that's happened in the past, all those early years up until now, all of that's done. I have no desire to look back on it again. Maybe when I'm older. Maybe not. The only solution is to hope a chapter will be added someday that will change all of this. Or maybe it's better to leave it as it stands and let it go from me, as it feels it wants to. And so," he said, and placed his open hands together flat, "I close the book."

It's hard to imagine characters in *Surface of the Earth* saying such a thing. For them, the past is life, and to cut them off from it would be to make North Carolina as strange as North Dakota.

James Reston, Jr., has just completed a "Southern mystery" entitled "The Innocence of Joan Little." He teaches at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.