

Family Secrets: Gay Sons—A Mother’s Story

Jean M. Baker
New York, London: The Harrington Park Press.

Reviewed by Fiona Joy Green

Jean M. Baker, licensed psychologist, widow and mother of two closeted gay sons takes on an ambitious task of attempting to “illustrate how societal attitudes about homosexuality encourage secrecy, preventing gay children from confiding in their parents and preventing parents from understanding or accepting homosexuality in their children”(ix). Drawing on her own experience of parenting her two children, who both kept their homosexuality secret from everyone, including each other, Baker sets out to dispel various myths and stereotypes about homosexuality that destroy the social and psychological development of gay youth and their families.

Family Secrets, divided into seventeen short chapters over 225 pages, leads us through the young lives of Andy and Gary, Baker’s two sons. Gary, the younger of the two boys by four years, is the main focus of the narrative, as he is the first to disclose his sexuality and dies at the age of 27 due to an AIDS-related illness in 1989. Little attention is paid to Andy’s sexuality which Baker discovers while accidentally reading Gary’s personal mail after his death. The main focus of the book, then, is on Gary’s life, with numerous chapters addressing his childhood, adolescence, “coming out,” becoming a writer, and falling in love. Here Baker successfully uses recollections, often in the form of letters from friends, teachers, and other significant people in Gary’s life, to provide insight into who Gary was. A substantial portion of the text also deals with Baker’s experience of watching Gary live with the “verdict” and reality of AIDS, as well as her own grief at the loss of a healthy and living son. The final two chapters, where Baker relies heavily on research and scientific findings, as well as her own experience, present arguments for the right to die and strategies to dispel fallacies and negative stereotypes regarding homosexuality.

Baker is successful in revealing why some gay men may feel they do not meet the expectations of parents, teachers, friends, and others. She provides excerpts from Gary’s personal letters, and published works to illuminate the influence of societal pressures and family expectations on his feelings of shame and inadequacy as a gay youth. Baker also successfully delivers an honest description of how the body, mind, and spirit of people living with AIDS are ravaged and demolished as they succumb to the destruction of AIDS related illnesses. One is left with an understanding of the horror of AIDS, the helplessness of those living and dying of the disease and those loved ones who hopelessly watch as they die.

Unfortunately, *Family Secrets* falls short of meeting the formidable task of providing an in-depth understanding of why Baker's sons, or other gay men, keep their identities as gay males secret from family, friends, and others. What is obviously missing, and most frustrating, is the Baker's analysis of her own role as a mother in contributing to, and perpetuating, the need of both her sons to keep their sexuality a secret. Throughout the narrative Baker provides glimpses of her own homophobia, appearing tolerant and as a therapist, yet feeling devastated as a parent when she discovers that Gary is gay. The continued hope that Gary is somehow not gay is central to the first half of the book and lingers throughout the text. I found her need to attribute Gary's idiosyncracies, and many of his personal choices, to his sexuality alone, a testimony to her homophobia. Human development is much more complex and complicated.

Although I recognize that Baker is strongly influenced by both the psychological theories of homosexuality of the 1970s and 1980s, and the general hatred for and ignorance about homosexuality and homosexuals during the reign of Regan and Bush in the U.S., where Baker lives and practices, I am frustrated. Surely, as a psychologist, Baker can see the necessity for an analysis of her contribution as a mother to the pain and suffering that both her sons experience due to homophobia and the secrecy about their sexuality. The fact that Andy never disclosed his homosexuality to Baker, even after witnessing her love and support for his brother through his suffering and death, attests to the continued lack of comfort, if not homophobia, I suspect he experiences in the mother/son relationship. It is not until the latter part of book, after the death of Gary, that Baker accepts the tragedy of Gary's life is his death and "the fact of his gayness" (181). This suggests homophobia and attests to the need for self-analysis by Baker. Had Baker done her homework by addressing her personal role in the "family secret" of her gay sons, I think her book would have been much more insightful.

Mother of My Mother: The Intricate Bond Between Generations

Hope Edelman
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Reviewed by Fiona Joy Green

Mother of My Mother: The Intricate Bond Between Generations, part memoir and part reportage, comes on the heels of Hope Edelman's international bestseller *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss* (1995). In the introduction to this