

Reading Group Guide

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The Evil Stepmother

My nine-year-old stepson Adam and I were coming home from kung fu. “Maureen,” Adam said—he calls me ‘Maureen’ because he was seven when Bob and I got married and that was what he had called me before. “Maureen,” Adam said, “are we going to have a Christmas tree?”

“Yeah,” I said, “of course.” After thinking a moment. “Adam, why didn’t you think we were going to have a Christmas tree?”

“Because of the new house,” he said, rather matter-of-fact. “I thought you might not let us.”

It is strange to find that you have become the kind of person who might ban Christmas trees.

We joke about me being the evil stepmother. In fact, the joke is that I am the Nazi Evil Stepmother From Hell. It dispels tension to say it out loud. Actually, Adam and I do pretty good together. But the truth is that all stepmothers are evil. It is the nature of the relationship. It is, as far as I can tell, an unavoidable fact of step relationships.

We enter into all major relationships with no real clue of where we are going; marriage, birth, friendship. We carry maps we believe are true; our parents’ relationship, what it says in the baby book, the landscape of our own childhood. These maps are approximate at best, dangerously misleading at worst.

Dysfunctional families breed dysfunctional families. Abuse is handed down from generation to generation. That it's all the stuff of 12-Step programs and talk shows doesn't make it any less true or any less profound.

The map of stepparenting is one of the worst, because it is based on a lie. The lie is that you will be mom or you will be dad. If you've got custody of the child, you're going to raise it. You'll be there, or you won't. Either I mother Adam and pack his lunches, go over his homework with him, drive him to and from Boy Scouts, and tell him to eat his carrots, or I'm neglecting him. After all, Adam needs to eat his carrots. He needs someone to take his homework seriously. He needs to be told to get his shoes on, it's time for the bus. He needs to be told not to say 'shit' in front of his grandmother and his teachers.

But he already has a mother, and I'm not his mother, and no matter how deserving or undeserving she is or I am, I never will be. He knows it, I know it. Stepmothers don't represent good things for children. When I married Adam's father it meant that Adam could not have his father and mother back together without somehow getting me out of the picture. It meant that he would have to accept a stranger whom he didn't know and maybe wouldn't really like into his home. It meant he was nearly powerless. It doesn't really matter that Adam's father and mother weren't going to get back together, because Adam wanted to see his mom, and he wanted to be with his dad, and the way that it was easiest for him to get both those things was for his parents to be together.

It's something most stepparents aren't prepared for because children often court the future stepparent. You're dating, and it's exciting. Adam was excited that his father was going to marry me. He wanted us to do things together. But a week before the wedding, he also wanted to know if his mother and father could get back together. It wasn't that he didn't understand that the two things were mutually exclusive, it was more that they were unrelated for him. When I came over I was company, it was fun. But real life was mom and dad.

Marriage stopped that. That is the first evil thing I did.

The second evil thing that stepparents do is take part of a parent away. Imagine this, you're married, and your spouse suddenly decides to

bring someone else into the household, without asking you. You're forced to accommodate. Your spouse pays attention to the Other, and while they are paying attention to the Other, they are not paying attention to you. Imagine the Other was able to make rules. In marriages it's called bigamy, and it's illegal.

What's worse for the child is that they have already lost most of one parent. Now someone else is laying claim on the remaining parent. The weapons of the stepchild are the weapons of the apparently powerless, the weapons of the guerilla. Subterfuge. Sabotage. The artless report of the hurtful things his real mother has said about you. Disliking the way you set the table, not wanting you to move the furniture. And stepchildren—even more than children in non-step relationships—are hyperalert to division between parent and stepparent.

I was thirty-three when I married; I had no children of my own and never wanted any. I'm a book person, so before I got married I went out and bought books about being a stepmother. I asked that we all do some family counseling before and during the time we were getting married. The books painted a dismal picture. Women got depressed. Women felt like maids. Women got sick. There were lots of rules—the child needs to spend some time alone with their natural parent and some time alone with their stepparent in a sort of round robin of quality time; a stepmother should have something of her own that gives her a feeling of her own identity; don't move into their house, start a new house together if you possibly can.

I liked that there were rules so I followed them and they helped a lot (even though I suspect that, like theories of child-raising, our theories of step relationships are a fad and the advice in the books will all be different fifty years from now). But I was still evil, and that was the most disheartening thing of all. I felt trapped in a role not my own choosing. Becoming a stepmother redefined who I am, and nothing I did could resist that inexorable redefining. I suppose motherhood redefines who you are, too. Part of the redefinition of me has been just that—sitting on the bench with the row of anxious mothers at the Little League game or at martial arts. Going to school and being Adam's mother. Being Adam's mom. It has made me suddenly feel middle-aged in funny ways. I used

to go through the grocery line and buy funky things like endive, a dozen doughnuts, a bottle of champagne and two tuna steaks. Now I buy carts full of cereal and hamburger and juice boxes. I used to buy overpriced jackets and expensive suits. Now I go to Sears and buy four sweatshirts and two packages of socks in the boys department.

When I bought endive and champagne, the check-out clerk used to ask me what I was making. But no one asks you what you are making when you buy cereal and hamburger.

Beyond all this loomed the specter of Adam at sixteen. The rebellious teenage boy from the broken home, hulking about the house, always in trouble, always resentful. Like many stepchildren, Adam came with an enormous amount of behavioral baggage. He acted out the tensions of his extended family. He was sullen, tearful, resentful of me and equally resentful of his mother. I knew that Adam was the victim in all this, but when you're up to your ass in alligators, it is hard to remember that your original intention is to drain the swamp. I had read that I would be resentful, but nothing prepared me for a marriage that was about this alien child. I didn't marry Adam, he didn't marry me, and yet that is what my marriage came down to. By the time Adam was dealt with, my husband and I were too exhausted to be married.

My relationship with Adam was good, better than the relationships described in all those books. He was a happier, healthier, more behaved child than he had been when I married Bob—after all, it is easier to parent when there are two of you. People complimented me on what a fine job I had done. I was the only one who suspected that there was a coldness in the center of our relationship that Adam and I felt. I could console myself that he had been better off than he was before I married Bob, and he was. But I knew that something was a lie.

One day Adam said angrily that I treated the dog better than I treated him. Of course, I liked the dog, the dog adored me, and Adam, well Adam and I had something of a truce. The kind of relationship a child would have with an adult who might ban Christmas trees from the house. So the accusation struck home.

I started to deal with my stepson the way I deal with my dog. Quite literally. A boy and a stepmother have a strange tension in a physical

relationship. I hug Adam and I kiss him on the forehead, on the nose, anywhere but on the mouth. I am careful about how I touch him. I suspect that the call from Child Protective Services is the nightmare of every stepparent. But after that comment I began to ruffle his hair the way I ruffle the dog's ears. I rubbed Adam's back. I petted him. I occasionally gave Adam a treat, the way I occasionally give the dog one. At first it was all calculated, but within a very short time, it was natural to reassure Adam.

It has made all the difference.

Adam is almost twelve, and the specter of the delinquent teenager in the dysfunctional family still haunts me, but it doesn't seem so likely at the moment. As Adam grows older, my husband and I have more time to be married.

Speaking from the land of the stepparent, I tell you, this business of being evil is hard. It is very hard. Being a stepparent is the hardest thing I have ever done. And what rewards there are, are small. No one pats me on the head for having given up the pleasures of endive and champagne and tuna steaks for spaghetti sauce and hamburger. That's what mothers do. Except, of course, they get to be the mom.

Author Interview

Q. The title of the collection identifies the recurring motif of mothers, and their interactions with other family members, a motif central to many of these stories. Was this a conscious choice or a pattern that you recognized after writing and publishing the stories?

A. I started writing stories about mothers because of something the writer Karen Joy Fowler said at a workshop. In a story by another writer, the main character's mom called, and Karen made the offhand comment that she was glad to see a mother in a story. At the time I was struggling mightily with the whole exercise of being a stepmother and one of the things I had trouble sorting out was the difference between issues that were 'step' issues and just the same stuff that comes up for every parent. In my eyes, everything was because I wasn't my kid's 'real mom'. (We had full custody of my stepson.) Some of those things were just parent things. When something is important to me and I don't understand it, I often write about it.

Mothers were just expected to be so perfect, you know?

Some of the pieces in the collection had already been written by this point, but I found that mothers had already started coming up in my fiction, and came up more and more. I had been thinking about a collection on and off for years and kicking around names, most of which

were pretty stupid. Then Small Beer Press asked me to do a collection and I realized the name of the collection was *Mothers & Other Monsters*, and everything just sort of jelled around that.

Q. What is it that makes mothers such rich territory in fiction?

A. Nobody much writes about them. There are some great stories about mothers, but for the most part, motherhood is a very rigid role. A Hollywood actor observed recently that she had reached the point where she had two choices in roles, Good Mommy and Psycho Mommy. (Shirley MacLaine specializes in the grandmother version of these roles—but Psycho Grandmothers also Dispense Wisdom and Allow Children To Be Themselves.) I'm a different mother than any of my kid's friend's mothers. And they're all different from each other in ways a good deal more complicated than Good Mother and Bad Mother.

There are some really good things written about motherhood. Tillie Olsen's story, "I Stand Here Ironing" is one. Lorrie Moore's harrowing "People Like That Are the Only People Here" is another wonderful short story. But for the most part, we can explore the relationships between lovers and between fathers and sons, but we're nervous about talking about mothers and children.

Q. You are also able to focus closely on the experiences of children and teenagers in such stories as "Interview: On Any Given Day" and "Laika Comes Back Safe." What are the difficulties involved in capturing the voices of these younger characters?

A. Language. My language for teenagers is inevitably a bit lame. My son helped me a bit. I told myself that even if their language was dead on, in five years it would sound preposterous, and just wrote it anyway. I'm also oddly protective of my teenagers. I work really hard not to embarrass them. My memories of being an adolescent usually involve one humiliating moral or social failure after another. I tend to shy away from doing that to them.

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But I'm really comfortable with coming-of-age stories. I think my generation has never believed we were adults.

Q. It seems as if literary fiction is finally returning to a broader, more inclusive spectrum than the realism that has been predominant for so long. Your stories often work with speculative elements. How do you view the role of realism in fiction?

A. You know, I always get this question asked from the other direction—how do I view speculative elements. This is a *great* question. I was drawn to science fiction for the ways in which it allowed me to skip parts of real life I hated. I liked SF that made life more romantic. I liked Andre Norton's protagonists finding out they weren't ordinary. I wanted to be a mutant, an escapee from a different reality where I was special.

I studied writing for years. Some of that was formal—I have a masters degree from New York University that would be an MFA in creative writing if I got it today. Some of it was the more traditional way to become of writer. Write a lot, most of it bad, find people who can tell you it's bad. Learn to get better. I found power in realism. I liked psychological realism when I read it. Those details—the moments we have all experienced but maybe never seen written down—work like a kind of electric jolt in a good story. In the Lorrie Moore story I mentioned, her two-year-old son has cancer. She describes being in the office of the pediatric oncologist and her son is doing that thing toddlers do so joyously, flicking on and off the light switch, while the pediatric oncologist explains what the cancer means and what they'll do. How many times have I seen a toddler entranced with a switch—a flashlight, a vacuum cleaner, anything. And juxtaposed against the patient doctor explaining the moment is almost unbearable.

Q. How do you think working with fantastic or science fictional elements enriches your work?

A. It's like a lens. It takes the story and throws the elements of relationship in high relief. In "Frankenstein's Daughter," the situation is not so

uncommon. The daughter has chronic health problems that will potentially be fatal. The mother pays very little attention to her son because her daughter is so often in a life-or-death situation. The fact that the daughter is a clone of her dead daughter just heightens the situation. It justifies the very common feeling ‘this is my fault’ because she chose her daughter’s existence. And it startles the story in some way. I like that the daughter’s physiological problems come right out of the scientific literature on cloning. But I also like that, as I wrote the story, I found that the family was very much like a lot of other families.

Q. Your stories have been recognized both inside and outside the SF genre. Do you feel more at home as a writer in either field?

A. Both and neither, I guess. Science fiction has been really good to me, but I am conscious of having disappointed a lot of readers. People complain that I write boring stories. Depressing stories. That my stories could be about today if you took the speculative element out. Some of my stories, like “Laika Comes Back Safe,” may not even have a speculative element. (Although just because I think that doesn’t mean it’s true.)

But outside the field, I think I’m seen as a little precious. I write science fictional stories about moms. Kind of a niche. The way feminist writing is seen as a niche. I feel that for years my stories weren’t read outside the field. So inside the field I was seen as not science fictional enough and outside the field I was too science fictional.

This is a little like stepparenting/parenting issues. The non-genre writers I know also have difficulties with the ways in which their work is visibly shaped for the market. Any time a book or story is in the world, it’s in some place in a book store, in some specific magazine that means some people see it and others don’t. Often there are people who don’t see it who might very much like it, and people who do see it who feel misled by the packaging.

Q. Your stories often deal with the domestic, although usually in bold, original settings. Do you feel fiction that focuses on older women or domestic life is treated differently?

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A. Sometimes. For one thing, I get asked about the fathers a lot. Where are the fathers? But mostly no. I've been really well received, and I've gotten extraordinary attention from my peers. I'd say that my fiction has been treated very well by people from workshops like Sycamore Hill and Rio Hondo, and by the East Side Writers and the local SF writer's group. They grappled directly with it, called me to account on it, and in large part let me become the writer I am today. Editors have always published my work, they haven't marginalized it.

Q. Several of the stories in the collection—most notably “Oversite” and “Presence”—feature characters dealing with the fallout of Alzheimer's or dementia in their lives. What are you exploring in these stories?

A. Alzheimer's, like other brain disorders, calls into question the very nature of self. What is self? Who are we? I think we are our physical selves, particularly our brains. I have a particular fear of dementia and of loss of self. More so, I would say, than a fear of death. The irony of that is that now my mother has dementia, so for the past few years I have been privy to a close-up look of the way in which her 'self' is dissolving. The 'self,' I must say, is very persistent. Even as my mother loses aspects of language and some of her personality changes, there is a stubborn core of something that, at this point at least, is still recognizably connected to the historic 'her.'

Q. Consciousness and identity emerge as two strong themes within the collection. What did you want to say in dealing with these?

A. I don't know that I wanted to say anything. I think I don't understand consciousness or identity. There's a saying in fiction, 'Write what you know.' I think better fiction comes out of writing about the things that are important to me, but that I'm fundamentally uncertain about. That doesn't mean I sit down and say, 'I'm going to write a story about identity.' I always think I'm writing a story about a girl who thinks her best friend is a werewolf. It just happens that I circle back to those issues of identity.

As a writer, I have a couple of itches that I scratch, things I return to

again and again. I tend to be drawn to motherhood because I'm trying to find a way to convince myself that I wasn't a monster. I'll get an idea for a story and think, I know, I'll make the mother have Alzheimer's. Not thinking about the connection between a teenager finding her way and an old woman losing her way and a mother helpless in the middle to ease either passage. I find out about all those things years later. I put them there, because those things are by default interesting to me. But it's not conscious.

Q. Did you learn anything new about these stories in the process of choosing and ordering them for the book?

A. I find it difficult to reread my own fiction. It was nice to see that a lot of it had held up. And I was surprised at how much the same things kept coming up, again and again. The mother in "The Lincoln Train," for example, has some form of dementia.

Q. How are these stories different from your novels, if at all? How does your writing process differ between the two?

A. I often write short stories to a deadline. Often, anymore, a workshop. They are more likely to be ideas that I'm not at all sure will work out. I can take more risks because most of the time I know that in a couple of months I'll at least have a draft.

Two of my novels have come out of short stories, so at some level, there is some overlap. But when I intentionally start a novel, I'm thinking it will have more ingredients than a short story. More loose ends. More questions and more stuff.

Q. You've talked in the past about workshoping with other writers being an important part of your writing life. What do you take from those experiences?

A. As I get older, I think I get better at reading and understanding stories, and some of that is from workshoping.

Mostly it's been very rare for someone not to tell me something that

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didn't show me a way to read the story I'd written. A lot of times it wasn't the way I wanted the story read. And a lot of times it said stuff about the story and about my writing that I wasn't very good at hearing.

But it's the only way I know to get better.

Q. Who are some writers you admire or who have influenced your work?

A. At any given time, anyone I'm reading who strikes me is going to have a pretty strong affect on me.

When I was in my twenties I was really taken by the work of Samuel R. Delany and the novels of Joan Didion. I think I was drawn to the romanticism of Delany. I was also really taken with the way so much of Didion's stories happened off the page. I was also strongly drawn to a little book by Marguerite Yourcenar called *Coup de Grâce*. I reread it a couple of years ago and saw all sorts of aspects of it that distress me now that I'm in my forties but it affected me powerfully when I was younger.

A few years ago I found myself utterly charmed by the sheer artificialness of Raymond Carver's stories. I had always thought of them as very psychologically realistic. Minimal. All that. But what I like about them now is how artificial they are. Perfect little setups that spring shut at conclusion. Lately I've been reading the short fiction of Joy Williams. It's really astonishing.

I like the work of Kelly Link a lot.

I like the Harry Potter novels. Great escapism.

When I was younger, I expected what I thought of as a rigorous kind of lack of sentimentality in novels. Anything else struck me as cheating. Lately I have been drawn more and more to certain kinds of sentiment. Books like *I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith.

Q. What can we expect to see from you next?

I'm working on a novel. I've been working on it for six or seven years. But this time, I swear I'm going to finish it.

Interview by Gwenda Bond.

Talking Points

Some things to talk about. There are no right answers.

1. What is your take on the title of this collection—*Mothers & Other Monsters*? Is it that mothers are monstrous? How about the mothers in this collection? Who are the *Other Monsters*?
2. Science-fiction stories may be set in places real or imaginary, in real or imaginary times. Even so, they are usually about the here and now. Do you feel McHugh is able to address contemporary issues in a more—or a less—effective way through the use of her imaginary settings? What contemporary issues seem to interest her most?
3. Advances in technology allow parents to monitor their children in ways that were impossible a generation ago. What along these lines has already changed since you were a teenager? Would you prefer to be a teenager now? Would you prefer to have been a parent then?
4. How much oversight is too much?
5. Does McHugh's treatment of stepmothers seem accurate? What are some of the difficulties stepmothers face here? Why are stepmothers traditionally seen as wicked? With more families being headed by single parents, will the stereotype of the wicked stepmother lose popularity?

6. McHugh works within a number of literary traditions including realism (“Eight-Legged Story”), ghost stories (“In the Air”), science fiction (“The Cost to Be Wise”), fantasy (“Ancestor Money”), fairy tales (“The Beast”), and narrative nonfiction (“Interview: On Any Given Day”). Science fiction has been characterized as a literature of exploration and therefore seen as especially appropriate for teenagers. Are these stories you would give to a teenager to read? What aspects of these stories would you have enjoyed as a teenager?
7. One of the effects of Alzheimer’s Disease is that life decisions for an individual have to be made by someone else. Do the reactions of the Alzheimer’s sufferer’s families in these stories seem realistic to you? How about the treatment of and the treatments for the disease?
8. What would you do if your partner were cured of Alzheimer’s but was not quite the person they had once been? (As in “Presence”)
9. In “Laika Comes Back Safe,” is Tye a werewolf or a kid who thinks he’s a werewolf? Which is scarier?
10. In “Ancestor Money,” a woman burns an offering for her grandmother. In China, these offerings include paper money called ‘Hell Money’ and elaborate paper models of houses, cars and even things like paper model fax machines and paper model cell phones. The idea is that when they are burned, the ancestors receive them as goods and money. What would you send your ancestors?
11. McHugh’s protagonists are frequently trapped in some way—by love, by law, by history, by illness. How do you feel about reading stories in which the narrator has little power and few choices? How well do you think McHugh’s narrators do in the circumstances in which they find themselves?
12. When it’s possible to rejuvenate your body, will you?

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13. Would you describe these as love stories?
14. Did this collection remind you of any other books? What did these stories gain by being collected together? What differences do you experience between reading stories separately in magazines as compared to reading them in a collection or anthology?