



All Happy Families

Jeanne McCulloch

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The Glass Castle meets *The Nest* in this stunning debut, an intimate family memoir that gracefully brings us behind the dappled beachfront vista of privilege, to reveal the inner lives of two wonderfully colorful, unforgettable families.

On a mid-August weekend, two families assemble for a wedding at a rambling family mansion on the beach in East Hampton, in the last days of the area's quietly refined country splendor, before traffic jams and high-end boutiques morphed the peaceful enclave into the "Hamptons." The weather is perfect, the tent is in place on the lawn.

But as the festivities are readied, the father of the bride, and "pater familias" of the beachfront manse, suffers a massive stroke from alcohol withdrawal, and lies in a coma in the hospital in the next town. So begins Jeanne McCulloch's vivid memoir of her wedding weekend in 1983 and its after effects on her family, and the family of the groom. In a society defined by appearance and protocol, the wedding goes on at the insistence of McCulloch's theatrical mother. Instead of a planned honeymoon, wedding presents are stashed in the attic, arrangements are made for a funeral, and a team of lawyers arrive armed with papers for McCulloch and her siblings to sign.

As McCulloch reveals, the repercussions from that weekend will ripple throughout her own family, and that of her in-law's lives as they grapple with questions of loyalty, tradition, marital honor, hope, and loss. Five years later, her own brief marriage ended, she returns to East Hampton with her mother to divide the wedding presents that were never opened.

Impressionistic and lyrical, at turns both witty and poignant, *All Happy Families* is McCulloch's clear-eyed account of her struggle to hear her own voice amid the noise of social mores and family dysfunction, in a world where all that glitters on the surface is not gold, and each unhappy family is ultimately unhappy in its own unique way.

All Happy Families Details

Date : Published August 14th 2018 by Harper Wave

ISBN :

Author : Jeanne McCulloch

Format : Kindle Edition 256 pages

Genre : Autobiography, Memoir, Nonfiction, Biography, Biography Memoir

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From Reader Review All Happy Families for online ebook

Laura says

This memoir about life in a very wealthy family -- including the rather, um, odd events surrounding the author's wedding -- would have been fine as a New Yorker long piece, as long as it had been limited to the wedding itself. But it's nowhere near interesting enough for a full-length memoir and the writing is pedestrian. And I'll be honest: in this day and age, I really don't give a flying fuck about the first-world problems suffered by the .01 percent.

Sandy Lusardi DeSiervo says

This memoir was an enjoyable read.

Tamera says

Newly published memoir by a best friend, so I'm biased, and still, I KNOW this is a great read, beautifully written and recommended to all.

Beth says

This was enjoyable to read but not particularly memorable.

Marika says

This memoir is a true mashup of The Glass Castle and The Nest. Living a life that only the privilege that wealth can bring. A life where one doesn't need, or have to work for a living. A life of endless leisure and the only worry is where to spend the holidays. Of course, that is only on the surface that the world sees. The true picture is one where your father begins everyday at 8 am with can of Budweiser, and ends with a heartbreak that no amount of money can insulate you from. Side note, the Beales of Grey Garden fame were neighbors of this family, who they called the crazy cat ladys. That kind of rich.

I read an advance copy and was not compensated.

Paperback Paris says

—The review below was authored by Paperback Paris Contributor, Leah Rodriguez. [Read more.](#)

Jeanne McCulloch's poignant debut memoir, *All Happy Families*, examines the precarious nature of familial life and love in the wake of her father's fatal stroke on the eve of her 1983 wedding. The family's excitement suddenly shifts into a haze of shock and numbness, but there is never any question about the wedding continuing as planned. Jeanne's imperious mother, Pat, has only one instruction for the hospital on the morning of August 13: "If anything happens to my husband this evening, do not call this house. We cannot be disturbed...We are having a party."

McCulloch hones in on dialogue like this and connects it to past and future moments throughout the narrative, deftly exploring the incidents that stem from that day in August. She chronicles the ripple effect of her father's death without judgment, moving from her childhood on Park Avenue and her father's descent into alcoholism to the courtship between her and her husband, Dean, and the tentative position she holds within his family.

If McCulloch's memoir could be defined by any one line or moment, it would come from something her mother says during a hurricane season while the family is living in their Hamptons vacation home — a place that exists as its own character in the narrative. She says: "We live on such a perilous dune. All of this could just go, like that."

Not only does Pat's simple observation pinpoint the all-encompassing fact of our transience as human beings, but also the small ways in which love and the halcyon days of youth morph over time. McCulloch points to the happy moments of her childhood when her father, John — an immensely wealthy hyperpolyglot — would take his daughters on trips all over the world, a chance for him to practice one of his many languages; or days after school when she and her sisters would style his hair into outrageous designs while watching sitcoms that would make him snort with laughter.

Looking back, though, McCulloch recognizes that her father was at the beginning of a steady decline as his dependence on alcohol worsens. Even the childhood stories John made up for his children featured an octopus named Franklin who frequents a bar and orders drinks for all eight tentacles. Nevertheless, the lucidity and precision with which the author recollects her past and deconstructs the multiple perspectives that layer each remembered encounter successfully avoids the hyper-sentimentality that often accompanies similar stories.

Yet it isn't entirely clinical, either. There are moments when I wonder what she's thinking or how she manages to keep herself together or she's communicating with her husband during certain scenes since she positions herself as an observer in almost all situations, but she never dips into self-indulgence — everything pieces into the atmospheric and thematic prose that she's weaved together. Best of all, the text never lacks for humor and grace in the midst of bad circumstance.

With spare and economical writing, she elucidates the ways in which the "perilous dune" crumbles. Whether we want it to or not. The point — which she gets at without making too much of a fuss--is that people go on anyway. Because that's what life is.

Barbara says

I would describe this as one very melancholy memoir. It opens with the author's memories of her wedding day, one eclipsed by tragedy when her father dies unexpectedly. It's her years later account of being raised in a wealthy, privileged family, fortunate enough to have a prestigious address overlooking NYC's Park Avenue

as well as a summer home in the Hamptons, before the Hamptons were even called The Hamptons. Most of the book's anecdotes are concentrated there at the seaside mansion, a place her father purchased with the hope, he said, that it would be an anchor and genesis for many happy family memories for her and her sisters. And while there were some sprinkled recollections of idyllic, carefree childhood days spent by the sand and sea among siblings, cousins and other family friends, mostly it's a story about failed marriages and loss. It's a study of contrasts between her perceptions of her own family life, one experienced as the child of an idle rich father quietly drinking himself to death in his coexistence with her imperious, self-absorbed and often acid-tongued mother- and that of her husband's seemingly enviably close knit family. I won't spoil with details about the demises of the other main marriages in the book, except to say the author gives very few actual clues or insights into those unravelings herself. Other than that, there's an occasional wry pearl of wisdom about love, life and relationships attributed her mother-in-law and a few to her own parents, but nothing I would call an abiding blueprint for living. Probably that wasn't the point. It was a memoir, a peek into a kind of wealth and leisure most of us will never know, coupled with familiar enough tales of family dysfunction and sorrow I found almost as gloomy in its closing pages as in its opening ones.

Heather says

Good story of families and their love for each other despite their oddities/dysfunctionality. The protagonists mother was annoying AF as a person, but I still enjoyed the read and am thankful she's not MY mom.

Joanna says

With material like this, you have to go juicy or go exquisite. Jeanne McCulloch aims for exquisite but lands, alas, on flat. The author interviews are much more interesting and insightful than the book, honestly, so it's not like she doesn't have it in her.

Wendy says

Enjoyed this book and her writing style. Very well written book.

Cheryl says

Being raised in and raising my family as middle class, or working poor if you will, I always felt that money really might buy happiness. I felt my finances, or lack thereof, was the root of what some would call a dysfunctional life. As a child worrying that my dad might one day get enough and leave, or my mother was truly sick and going to die, left a deep seated dread that something was always about to go wrong, and if I only had money, I could provide security from the hurts life brings. Ms. McCulloch has removed those misconceptions, money would have made no difference at all. She has portrayed herself and her family in stark prose that is proof positive that money does indeed not buy happiness. The struggle its self if simply life. Funny in places and sad and disappointing in others. She has opened her heart to readers in a fresh and entertaining way. Well done. A good read.

