

'A FAMILY IN THERAPY' is the story of an Australian family from a large country town who entered family therapy when the events and emotions they were experiencing became painful and distressing enough to threaten the destruction of the family unit and the lives of some of its members. It can be characterised as a mystery story: why did Lorraine and her 15-year-old daughter Donna attempt suicide? Was it the fault of husband and father Jack or brother Ernie? Will they be able to be helped?

Most of all, this is a book about the therapeutic process as practised by one practitioner, a Melbourne clinical psychologist, his personal "window on therapy". The five taped and transcribed interviews with the family reveal each family member's perception of the nature and cause of their dilemma and the immediate response and interpretation of the therapist.

Like a Greek drama, the family members act out their lives innocent of the unconscious motives and self-deceptions, often embedded in past histories, which if they stay hidden will lead inevitably to further despair, destruction, alienation, even death. The therapist and his psychiatrist co-author, like the Greek chorus, provide insight and explanation, eliciting awareness of the consequences of attitude or behavior, attempting to avert the tragic ending by the *deus ex machina* of encouraging change in the way the family perceives its world.

A clear understanding of the way problems have evolved in the family and how they may be resolved is revealed by the juxtaposition of the family's conversation with the therapist's comments and interpretations of the possible meanings of all statements and body language. The therapists also give a running commentary about the constructive or negative impact of the therapeutic interventions.

Reading the bare transcript, it is difficult, at times, to accept the severity of the situation or the complexity underlying the therapeutic process. The therapist's redefinition of family actions as positive, his joking about football and

Fly on the wall to a life crisis

A FAMILY IN THERAPY, by Peter McCallum and Moshe Lang (McPhee Gribble/Penguin, \$14.99).

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pillow fights, and the commonplace dialogue belie the subtlety and skill of the interventions and the theoretical assumptions that bring about change in the family.

The behaviors of each family member are revealed, not as pathological, but as attempts, even if inappropriate or unsuccessful, to redress felt injustices in the family, to ward off blame or anger to oneself or others and to provoke symptoms that distract from problems too difficult to acknowledge that could threaten the fragile family balance.

In the Black family, the children focus attention away from the serious marital problems of their parents. The burden of protecting either father or mother has interfered with the children's ability to enjoy each other or to feel secure in family life. Marital dissatisfaction undermines the capacity of mother and father to be effective parents. The parents' own family histories and losses are seen to influence the rigid and unproductive communication patterns that contribute to feelings of loneliness and neglect.

Without assigning blame or absolving the family of responsibility for their actions, the authors sum up with deceptive simplicity the essence of the therapeutic intervention as a fostering of hope,

or "countering the helplessness by creating space in which everyone can contemplate alternative behavior".

In this family drama, the therapeutic intervention is deemed successful. The ending, however, is not judged by the degree of happily ever after but by the therapist's and family's perception that they were managing their lives despite inevitable difficulties and achieving a level of skills and understanding to make life tolerable and satisfactory enough to discontinue therapy.

For the enlightened reader, an element of self-help through identification with the themes is possible. For despite the extreme despair and crisis in the Black family which culminated in the attempted suicide of the wife and daughter, the ordinariness of family activities, concerns and interactions is striking.

At this level the family's story can be appreciated as a commentary on the problems, perhaps extreme in some instances, of families in our contemporary community, where the expectations about roles of men and women are undergoing transition and the rules of parenting and relations between parents and children are less consistent. These circumstances can contribute to confusion and stress as they require negotiation and compromise among family members.

To the author's credit, they succeed in not playing "language games" using professional jargon to restrict the relevance of the book to a limited audience. It has been left to five commentators, in the final chapter, to place the events in psychological, historical, sociological and family therapy theoretical contexts. This approach results in some duplication and fragmentation, but highlights variations on similar themes.

In this personal journey of family and therapist, the reader becomes the third member of the therapy team, sharing the therapists' (and family's) frustrations and confusion, criticising mistakes and applauding successes. Readers, all whom are members of a family, will find some point of recognition.

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