

A Family Theme, a Family Secret

by K.L. Cook

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In addition to teaching a variety of undergraduate and graduate creative-writing workshops, I also co-teach Family Systems in Film and Literature, an interdisciplinary literature/psychology course in which we use stories, novels, and films to illuminate the emotional legacies within families. In a family biography assignment, I ask students to write a narrative that examines a particular theme or secret within their own families. This assignment often provokes the most compelling, eloquent, and psychologically nuanced narratives I've read from students, even from students who don't necessarily consider themselves writers.

The assignment has been so successful that I've adapted it for my fiction-writing workshops, often with extraordinary results. I particularly like how the exercises encourage writers to move beyond simplistic depictions of characters (and families of characters) as victims and victimizers. Instead, it urges writers to examine the way a whole family contributes to a theme or secret, as well as the way that theme or secret can clarify the identity, values, emotional history, desires, and anxieties of the family.

This assignment has also deeply informed the writing and revision of my own books—*Last Call*, a short-story cycle that depicts thirty years and three generations in the life of a West Texas family, and *The Girl from Charnelle*, a novel that focuses on a series of interlocking secrets in this same family.

Family Theme Exercise. Predominant themes emerge over generations and are imprinted on a family as a kind of private mythology. "I come from a family of honorable thieves," a character might say. Or, as Nick Carraway announces at the beginning of *The Great Gatsby*, "My family have been prominent, well-to-do people in this middle-western city for three generations... and we have a tradition that we are descended from the Dukes of Buccleuch..." Focus on a central theme in your fictional family's life. From where does this theme derive? How has this theme worked through the generations, positively and/or negatively? In what ways has it helped create a sense of loyalty and identity among the family members, or in what ways has it agitated the family's collective chronic anxiety and led to cut-off, regression, or reinvention? Keep in mind that with a family theme, the

family members are not only consciously but often *keenly* aware of the theme and its emotional legacy. Once you've established this theme, try one of the following narrative strategies:

Create a scene in which two characters from the family are at odds about the legitimacy of this family theme. Let one character attempt to convince the other to follow a destiny that will either reinforce or break free from this theme. Have the other character resist those arguments.

Or structure a story around three family members. Let one family member passionately attempt to convince a second (the protagonist perhaps) to follow or live by the family theme/legacy, and let a third member attempt to convince the second to resist, even undermine, the family theme/legacy. It helps to let the two members of the family who are trying to convince the protagonist have histories that reinforce their positions.

Family Secret. According to family-systems theory, there are no secrets in families. The entire family colludes, either consciously or unconsciously, in keeping and perpetuating a secret. Often a secret is linked to a family's conception of shame, and may be used as a strategy for one generation to exert its will (about how to behave) over another generation. For example, in Maxine Hong Kingston's essay, "No Name Woman," the suppression of a Chinese woman's shame and suicide creates anxiety in her entire family, especially in her niece (Kingston herself) as she searches for "ancestral help" in defining her own identity. In James Baldwin's story, "Sonny's Blues," the narrator learns a terrible secret about his father and uncle that determines the way in which he tries to protect his brother.

Is there a secret in your fictional family? How has that secret generated either chronic or acute anxiety in the life of this family? Does that secret directly affect the story you wish to tell? Can you identify the members of this family who absorb or "bind" the anxiety of this suppressed secret? How do they bind it? What is the effect of the secret on the emotional health of the entire fictional family, as well as the individuals within it? Once you've explored the nuances of this secret, use it as the primary organizing strategy for your story. Here are two ways of doing this:

Start your story with a detailed accounting of the secret, and then structure your narrative to dramatize the emotional effects of this secret on the character most affected—or "bound"—by the anxiety it creates.

Or structure your story as a mystery in which you create a protagonist who, from the beginning of the narrative, is on a search to discover the secret and who must contend with various family members' attempts to either aid or sabotage this search. A secret's power comes from its repression, and there will always be members of a family who want either to continue the suppression of the secret or expose it in order to strip it of its emotional power. ■

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