

AlbertMohler.com

Reading Log, June 19, 2009 Fathers and Sons

Friday, June 19, 2009

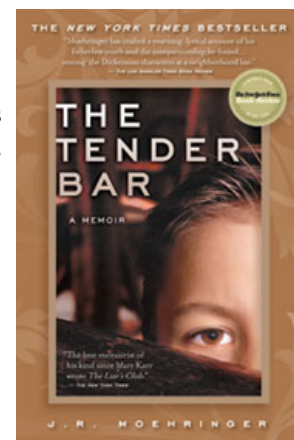
The theme of fathers and sons is one of the constants of literature, both ancient and modern. From Ivan Turgenev to Chuck Palahniuk, modern literature seems particularly obsessed with fathers and their sons — and sons without fathers.

Thinking this week about Fathers Day, I was particularly reminded of significant memoirs that relate to fathers and sons. One of the most touching of these was written by J. R. Moehringer. His memoir, *The Tender Bar*, is one of the most elegant and moving accounts of father loss to be found anywhere in modern literature. J. R.'s father disappeared when he was an infant, but the boy grew up in New York City listening to his father's voice. His father was a prominent disc jockey whose voice came through the radio. Listening to the radio, the boy was filled with a hunger those represented by "The Voice." Looking for father figures, he found his way to the local bar, where he began to hang around with the men who frequented there.



J. R. Moehringer came to understand that his father was a man of talents, "but his one true genius was disappearing." The men at the bar, on the other hand, tended to come around and hang around. They befriended the young boy and became, in the main, the only positive adult male influences in his life. They taught him both honorable and dubious male habits and introduced him into the world of men. Speaking of one particular summer, he reflected: "Everything the men taught me that summer fell under the loose catchall of confidence. They taught me the importance of confidence. That was all. But that was enough. That, I later realized, was everything."

I was deeply moved by reading *The Tender Bar* and the story of this young boy who so desperately wanted his father, even as he listened to "The Voice" on the radio. Moehringer's experiences with the men in the bar, though formative and hugely important to him, could never replace the authentic role of his father. How many boys are still listening in hope of hearing "The Voice" of their fathers?



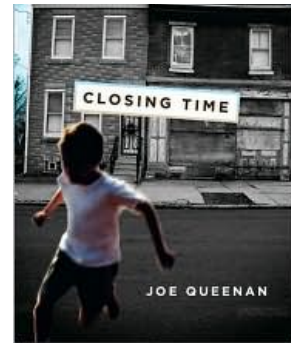
Another important memoir on fatherhood, written by a son, is *Closing Time* by Joe Queenan. A well-known author and contributor to leading newspapers and magazines, Joe Queenan is a professional writer who brings great skill to his memoir. In *Closing Time*, Queenan offers a grim, humorous, touching, and haunting story of his coming-of-age in Philadelphia during the 1960s. He offers some sweet reminiscences of times with his father, including a break-neck trip in a delivery truck through the streets of Philadelphia. Nevertheless, most of his account is about a man who is deeply tormented by alcoholism. Queenan was abused in both body and soul by a father whose presence was more often than not a threat to his family.

Queenan traces his father's decline through a series of jobs he could not hold and through neighborhoods of one or another sort of trouble. "My father got broken when he was young, and he never got fixed. He may have wanted to be a good father, a good



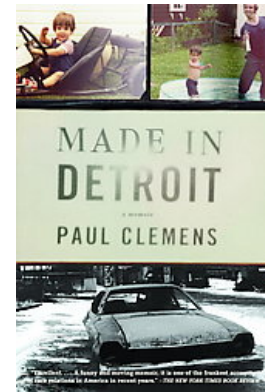
husband, a good man, but he was not cut out for the job. He liked to drink, but unlike some men who liked to drink, it was the only thing he liked to do. Among our relatives, he had a reputation as a happy-go-lucky fellow who, once he got a few beers in him, would turn into the life of the party. He was not the life of our party.”

Closing Time is a moving book and I learned a great deal about Joe Queenan, Philadelphia, and life as a boy there in the 1960s. Given the chronological overlap of our lives, I could not help reflecting on the fact that my boyhood was so different than his. Reading the book made me all the more thankful for my own father and more greatly concerned for the many children, both boys and girls, who know such pain at the hands of an abusive and/or alcoholic father.



After reading those two memoirs, one may wonder if many sons are moved to write memoirs about their appreciation and affection for fathers. At this point, it is good to remember that literature favors disaster over peace, conflict over calm, and, in a general sense, pain over pleasure. A father doing a good or adequate job as father does not make for the kind of character and plot that drives so much literature. Furthermore, too many writers in our own day would be frankly embarrassed to write a memoir in which they honor and celebrate their fathers. It simply isn't done.

That is what makes *Made in Detroit: A South of 8 Mile Memoir* by Paul Clemens such a refreshing surprise. Clemens, who grew up in one of Detroit's transitional neighborhoods during the 1970s and 1980s, saw the city transformed before his eyes and came to know his father as the great Gibraltar that held his family together. Clemens's father appears as a normal dad in the context of his working-class neighborhood. Dads were just there and they did what they had to do for their families. They may have been short tempered at times, but they were occasionally capable of much fun with their children and they showed their absolute dedication to family by the fact that they gave themselves to such hard work under such difficult circumstances. More often than not, they were tired to the bone, even as they had to patch a wall or discipline a son. As Paul Clemens relates, fathers in his neighborhood demonstrated a central task of manhood by doing what, under almost any circumstance, just had to be done.



He writes: “Families were fundamental to the way the area was organized, which is not to say that anyone spent much time getting sentimental over them as a concept. Families were viewed like most other things in this life, which is to say as sometimes dreary and ultimately disappointing, but preferable to a long list of even less desirable alternatives. . . Though they cursed aloud while doing so — and, internally, likely cursed the days they'd wed our mothers and fathered us — the men in our neighborhood, whether in hats and gloves during the dead of winter, or sweating and swearing up a storm in the middle of the summer, somehow manage to fix broken carburetors, replace drafty windows, and keep basement furnace is going a little bit longer, while their wives bought box after box of whatever was on sale and saw to it that their children didn't waste all their money at McDonald's. . .”

In his own way, in *Made in Detroit*, Paul Clemens demonstrates a model of respecting and honoring his father while telling the story, warts and all. His book is unique in being both gritty and sweet. I would suggest that Christian men — and fathers in particular — would do well to read this kind of literature. These secular memoirs, filled with both pain and promise, tell us a great deal about the world around us and, at the same time, remind us of our own calling — even as we hear that voice through words of pain.

Happy Father's Day. Let's be sure our children hear our voices and know our love.

