

TODAY

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■ Catherine Cusset

La haine de la familleParis. Gallimard. 2001. 224 pages
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LA HAINE DE LA FAMILLE is a remarkable novel for its precision, authenticity, and understanding of human nature. While the title emphasizes hatred within a family, the venom implicit in the verbal ejaculations is triggered by love of the profoundest kind. The family taking center stage includes Elvire, a judge; Philippe, her husband, an insurance broker; and four children: two girls — one of whom is the narrator — and two boys.

With the ferocity of a La Bruyère and the caricatural impact of a Daumier, Catherine Cusset's opening chapter images both her father's obsessive need for order and her mother's habitual mishaps. Audible as well to the reader are the father's rantings upon his discovery that a bath towel is missing. He knows this to be a fact, since he counted them only last week! Obsessive order is his byword, blaming others his curative agent. How else can he convey the diminishing role he feels himself playing within the family? The mother's problems are even more outrageous. Using the radio as both a weapon and a learning device, she drowns out her husband's screams by increasing its volume and listening to "France Culture" — foresight having taught her to place her many radios in crucial places around the house. Devoid of any sense of order, she never notices if a towel is clean or not, or if the cup from which she drinks her coffee is chipped, or whether her pots are dented. Worse,

she keeps losing things, and is frequently robbed, on one occasion of the 3,000 francs allotted to her housekeeper. For fear of her husband's ranting, she keeps these mishaps secret from him. On one occasion, only after throwing a plastic bag down the garbage chute did she realize it contained a bathing suit and a solid gold chain with a diamond pendant given to her by her husband. Fortunately, she was able to recoup the bag and its contents.

The list of the wife's slipshod deeds includes overfeeding her husband, who has gained forty kilos in forty years of marriage, while his wife has not gained one ounce. Her innate clumsiness, or lack of attentiveness, had manifested itself prior to her marriage: years earlier, she had invited her husband-to-be for supper, and was so carried away by the excitement of her soliloquy that, when flipping her omelet, she had tossed it instead into the washing machine. Few meals were ever served without a pot cover, a footstool, a dish, or some other item slipping from her hands, to be followed by her husband's reprimands. Such conflicts were exacerbated to the extreme when her husband taught her to drive.

One of the most ironic chapters in Cusset's novel focuses on how hard the narrator's mother had worked throughout her youth, including her law studies at Harvard, yet never had the courage to open a practice of her own. Still, the diligence she demonstrated in attaining her judgeship and the value she placed on her children's intellectual achievements will strike a chord with many mothers. How many nights did Elvire lie awake in panic prior to her children's important exams? To create good study habits, she banned all television. Only after great persuasion were the children permitted to watch cartoons based on *Astérix and Obélix*, *Tin Tin*, and Larousse's *Histoire de France*.

It came as no surprise to this reader to learn that the narrator's mother was Jewish, that her grandmother, a lawyer, had been nearly deported, and that her own mother had suffered traumatic effects from the terror of it all. Memorable as well is the narrator's visit to Auschwitz and Birkenau and her profound understanding of the values involved.

La haine de la famille is a memorable and unforgettable work!

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