

# Healing a broken childhood

## 'Mystery' a cathartic reconciliation with the past

### SWEET MYSTERY

A Book of Remembering

By Judith Hillman Paterson.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

288 pages. \$23.

By Steven Hill

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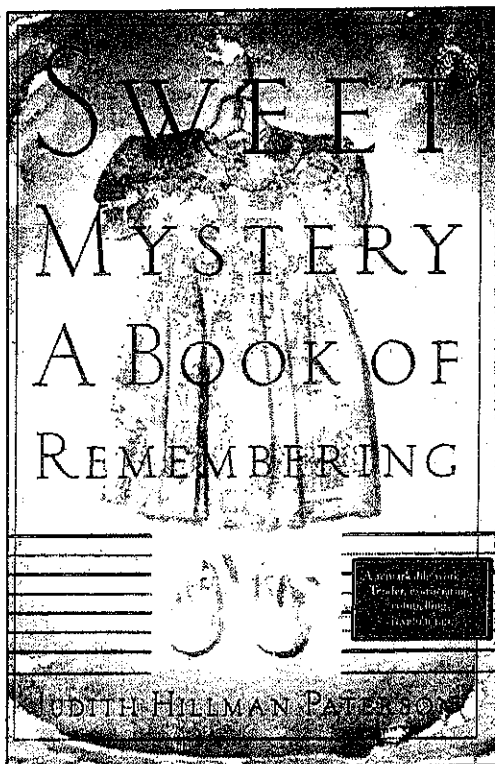
**B**ittersweet may be a more apt term for the mystery that tinges Judith Hillman Paterson's brave, melancholy memoir of a troubled Alabama girlhood.

Though Paterson garnered love from an extended family of dotting aunts, uncles and grandparents while growing up, that affection was undercut by what she calls the "class warfare" between her parents. Like the newsreel images of World War II that punctuate her childhood memories of the movies, the violence of Emily and Duke's marriage — marred by drinking, grief and infidelity — shadowed even the happiest times for Judith and her three siblings.

"Sweet Mystery: A Book of Remembering" shows how that darkness haunts them well into adulthood.

Her parents' families, Paterson writes, were "as different from one another as two families that had been Montgomery for several generations could possibly be." The Patersons, abolitionist Northerners who came south to educate slaves, went on to head Alabama's first black college and founded a greenhouse. The Hillmans, old-line Southern aristocrats whose wealth and social standing bottomed out when the Confederacy crumbled, disapproved of Emily's blue-collar husband even as they bemoaned the unfairness of their own fall from grace.

This deep-seated social division adds considerable tension to a marriage already burdened by addiction and depression. It also embodies the widening moral divide between Southerners who accepted desegregation and those who would bitterly defend "the complicated social and racial



dance they called the Southern Way of Life." As she strives to unify family history and personal memory, Paterson draws a portrait of a vanishing culture: a South still predominantly rural, provincial and very much segregated. The families' disagreements on race are a microcosm of the conflict that would rend the South for the next 20 years as competing visions of the future struggled for the region's soul.

As journalist and academic, Paterson is acutely aware of the historical context of her family's struggles. But as memoirist, her overriding concerns are rightly personal. Setting out to write an objective family history, she finds her story transformed — by the persistent emergence of long-suppressed childhood traumas — into a private battle to confront painful memories.

The most difficult involve her mother's early death, when Paterson was 9. Out of loyalty to their father, Paterson writes, she

and her siblings tried to forget their mother had ever lived. She attributes the death of her brother and institutionalization of two sisters to the stress of her parents' troubled marriage and the repression and denial of her mother's death. When she begins to experience unexplained bouts of depression and anger, Paterson recognizes in herself the same mental instability that befell Emily, and she sees in her children her own childhood fear that something was terribly wrong with her mother.

Those put off by the TV-talk-show culture of victimization our age fosters will be happy to find that suffering isn't always synonymous with victimization. Paterson bears no grudge against her parents. Rather, she seems relieved to uncover a pattern of alcoholism and depression extending back several generations. The discovery helps explain her family's troubles and, perhaps, gives her the insight to break the cycle for her own children. Thus absolved, her parents themselves become victims — of forces that are, if not beyond their control, certainly beyond their understanding.

Paterson presents a child's-eye view of remembered events, a narrative strategy that amplifies the emotional impact Duke and Emily's bad behavior has on their children, even as it hampers her overreaching goal to make sense of the past. Her lyrical, sensuous prose brings memory vividly to life and articulates with understated power the rage and sadness of the adult survivor of childhood trauma.

"Sweet Mystery" is a courageous account of personal suffering and recovery that forcefully affirms the necessity of confronting the past. "It is the 'help' note finally written," Paterson confides, "not only for the suffering that was mine, but for all who suffer in childhood and think, as I did, that the pain of forgetting is less than the pain of remembering."

Know your history, she seems to say. To the hungry soul, every bitter thing is sweet.

Steven Hill is a fiction writer who has contributed to Publishers Weekly and Kirkus Reviews. He lives in North Liberty, Iowa.