

# BOOKS

## A muddled feeling about First Lady's book on children

BY ART JESTER

HERALD-LEADER BOOK EDITOR

The hubbub surrounding Hillary Rodham Clinton's *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us* (Simon and Schuster, 318 pp., \$20) has nothing to do with the book.

Her effort to describe how we can rear children to become the kind of adults we want them to be — minus all of the awful possibilities — is thoroughly documented and passionately argued.

Clinton's commitment is strong. She knows what she's talking about.

However, by writing this book and agreeing to undergo interviews during a promotional tour, she left herself open to those nagging questions of Washington reporters and opponents of the First Family:

■ What was Hillary Clinton's role in the Whitewater episode, and in the controversial firing of the White House travel office staff?

■ Did she do anything illegal or improper?

The questions must be resolved elsewhere — and they should be resolved — but they are not the issues at hand in considering her book.

This is, of course, the season for political books and candidate biographies, and it's not just coincidental that Clinton's book appears as the 1996 campaign cranks up.

It's obvious that Clinton is taking on the right wing's version of "family values" with her own



Clinton

# Help arrives

## Remembering her painful childhood creates healing for Alabama native

### Sweet Mystery

A Book of Remembering  
By Judith Hillman Paterson  
Farrar Straus and Giroux. 278 pp. \$23.

### REVIEWED BY WADE HALL

It is sometime in the late '30s or the war years.

We are riding in my father's old pickup into Montgomery, Ala., from our hardscrabble farm some 35 miles away. We begin to see fine brick and frame houses set in spacious, green lawns. I have fleeting glimpses of children my age playing in the yards and skating on the sidewalks.

Although we are acquainted with none of them, I know that in some of these houses are people that we read about in the social columns of *The Montgomery Advertiser* — the fine people who swim and play golf at the country club and eat in fancy restaurants. I think how fortunate they are to be living in such a place. I would give anything to be like them.

Some 50 years later, I discover that Judith Hillman Paterson was growing up in this world, light years distant from mine. I know that if I had seen her back then jumping rope on the sidewalk, I would have envied her, though I would have been too country-shy to speak.

Now in her excruciatingly beautiful and painful memoir, *Sweet Mystery*, Paterson, a journalism professor at the University of Maryland, has opened the door of her childhood to reveal what I could never have imagined: the sad reality of a privileged family afflicted

with mental instability, alcoholism and drug addiction.

"My mother died when I was nine and she was thirty-one, so of course I remembered her." With this understatement she opens the searing, gripping story of her growing-up in an incredibly dysfunctional family in the dream city of my youth.

Although for years she had tried to repress her frightful memories, they often "returned unbeckoned — triggered by reminiscent fears, associations, certain kinds of weather, the cast of light on the side of a building, a fragment of a song or an odor remembered . . ."

Finally, in the late '80s, after the deaths of her mother Emily, her father Duke, her stepmother and her brother, and with her two sisters afflicted with the family curse of mental illness and alcoholism, she finds herself, although "damaged," nonetheless "the only person in my family still standing."

Eventually, she begins a search for her parents and for herself. It is a seven-year journey to courthouses, libraries, archives, attics and family homes in Kentucky, Ohio, Maryland, Virginia, and "all across the Deep South" and, more important, into the dark recesses of her memory. It is an odyssey of family and self-discovery.

Relentlessly, she builds an impressive and alarming family tree with members too Gothic and unbelievable to be fictional. Paterson weaves a tapestry that tells not only her family's history but the South's. This is the sort of book that William Faulkner would have written had he been daring enough to do a family memoir.



Judith Hillman Paterson

It is like a family album, with portraits, scenes and institutions that chronicle their story. Most of it is focused on her mismatched parents — the mother descended from the Southern plantation aristocracy, the father from a Scottish-Yankee abolitionist schoolteacher who came south after the Civil War to teach the freedmen.

"Violently attracted and violently repelled," Paterson writes, "they lurch together and apart like coupling animals, mixing passion, despair, whiskey, rage, and tenderness together in a fateful potion." As in a Greek tragedy, the inherited flaws of the doomed lovers lead to catastrophe. It is through the exhumation and reconstruction of her childhood that her parents' rage, violence and death finally produce a catharsis for her as well as the reader.

Underscoring the immediacy of the past, Paterson has staged her scenes with narration and dialogue told in a perpetual present tense:

"They stand in the dining room shouting. Duke is threatening to leave and not come back. I hang on to him, yelling, 'Don't go. Don't go.' Emily says, 'O, let him go. Who in hell cares. I'm the one who loves you.'"

This double vision of a middle-aged woman reliving her life as a young girl provides intensity and poignancy. These memories, seen through a cracked and distorted glass darkly, become the portrait of the artist as a survivor.

*Sweet Mystery* is also the story of a Southern town told by a woman who knows her city inside out and writes about it with the accuracy of a sociologist and historian and the sensitivity of a poet. Although Paterson's life was different from mine in many ways, she tells my story, too, by showing the pain and suffering of growing up not only in a dysfunctional family but amid mid-century Deep South manners and mores.

Once when she was a girl, in desperation, Judith wrote "HELP" on a piece of paper and left it at a neighbor's door. No help came. In *Sweet Mystery* she helps not only herself but "all those who suffer in childhood and think, as I did, that the pain of forgetting is less than the pain of remembering. For without the remembering, no matter how painful, we have no life to call our own."

■ Wade Hall is a professor of English at Bellarmine College in Louisville. He grew up near Union Springs, Ala.