

'Sweet Mystery' sorts through family pain

Sweet Mystery:
A Book of Remembering
 By Judith Hillman Paterson
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By Susan Kelly
 USA TODAY

A learned woman looks around her after the death of her stepmother and realizes that she is the only one in her family still standing.

A teacher, a mother, a success by any standard, she wonders how she escaped the alcoholism and mental illness that claimed her parents, her sisters, her brother.

Sweet Mystery is a remarkable story born of Judith Hillman Paterson's understanding that she did not escape unharmed. Armed with long-denied memories and extensive research into family history, Paterson unravels the mystery of her life and of those she loved and lost.

Chief among them are her parents, Julius "Duke" Paterson and Emily Hillman, husband and wife, lovers and deadly foes, alcoholics. Their story is told from a child's perspective, as Paterson steps back to the earliest part of her life and bears them witness.

Emily lost the battle with her demons in 1946 and died when she was 31, leaving a hard-drinking husband and four young children, including 9-year-old Judy. There is some-



By Jerry Bauer

Judith Hillman Paterson: Maryland journalism professor explores her family's history in the evocative memoir 'Sweet Mystery.'

thing strangely riveting about Judy's account of the years before her mother's death.

Paterson adroitly steps between the child's view of events she doesn't quite under-

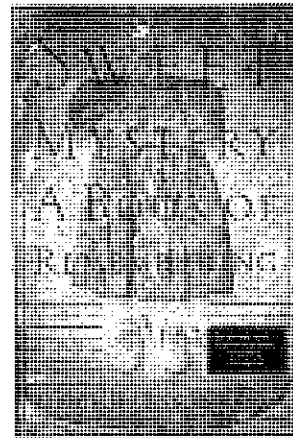
stand and the adult narrator who gives them the perspective of time.

However, *Sweet Mystery* is about more than its author. Like John Berendt's *Midnight*

Excerpt

"I get the tetanus shot in the dark room a few blocks away. The shot hurts. We head back up the street toward Bessie's. Cold sunlight strikes my face, I start to sweat, and everything goes black. I am falling and falling . . . Emily's arms go around me. Her stomach presses big against my chest, and I am in her arms in a way that never leaves my body but doesn't come back as a memory until 20 years later when my own daughter gets the flu and faints in my arms — and the lost moment flickers back. I had a mother. She loved me. I remember."

— From *Sweet Mystery: A Book of Remembering*



in the Garden of Good and Evil, it is as much about the South as the people in it. For Berendt, it was Savannah. For Paterson, it is Montgomery, Ala., in the years before Martin Luther King Jr. started his crusade. It was a time when black women and white women could be friendly but couldn't dine at the same table; a time when the mad Zelda Fitzgerald wandered the streets like a demented child.

Paterson tells of two very different families, united by the marriage of Duke and Emily but still divided at heart by the Civil War. Emily's affluent, slave-owning ancestors lost almost everything in the war. The Patersons came South as abolitionist missionaries.

This book is fascinating, but what makes it special is its compassion. Paterson tells her story with sadness and anger but also with great love. She watches her mother losing her fight with alcoholism, and despite the reality of what that meant to her as a daughter, still asks "if it doesn't perhaps take as much, or more, courage to wage a battle that is lost than to fight with hope for something that might be won."

The girl who lost a piece of her heart when her mother died became the woman who discovered that those who suffer in childhood must one day face and claim that pain.

That so great a pain forged so fine a writer is a sweet mystery of its own.