

Glass of Sorrows

SWEET MYSTERY

A Book of Remembering

By Judith Hillman Paterson

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By Robert H. Williams

FLANNERY O'CONNOR once wrote that life is a road, at the end of which we will surely be reunited with our creator, but along which we will be challenged by dragons, to slay or be slain, and that it is the duty of the writer to hammer such confrontations into a form that can be experienced by others, that is to say readers, or fellow travelers.

A paraphrase, yes, but teacher Judith Hillman Paterson seems to have gotten the same message and has disinterred her dragons for us in *Sweet Mystery: A Book of Remembering*, a beautifully written, excruciating collision of form and emotion, joy and pain, willpower and self-examination, control and surrender, memories, extrapolations, conclusions real and false, hearsay, scholarship, midlife genealogy tracking, investigative reporting, clumsy insertions, poetry, bad psychotherapy, buzzwords, onomatopoeia to make you wince and a 50-50 split of emotion recollected in tranquillity and tranquillity recollected in emotion.

Having said that, let it be noted that Paterson's examination of her Alabama childhood from her earliest identifiable

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FROM "SWEET MYSTERY: A BOOK OF REMEMBERING"

Emily Paterson, the author's mother

memories until the age of 9 has produced a crystal—as in nature through pressure and heat, flawed but clearly recognizable as a wonder. The primary dragon along this woman's path was (and remains) her mother's alcoholism and death from the effects of it at the age of 31, when Judith Paterson was 9 and already ruined by emotional battering.

Paterson's clear mission here is to concentrate on the process of remembering, to discern true memories from the idea of memories or the memories of memories. She stops from time to time to check this process out and see

how it's working, and it is at these points, and when she throws the switch from past tense to present (not seamlessly at all) that the danger and difficulty of this backward journey become apparent.

The dysfunction at hand spans the years 1936-46 and stars Emily Gentry Hillman Paterson, the mother, herself conceived during a conjugal visit by her mother to the asylum where her father, whom Emily never saw, died of "apoplexy." The costar is Julius Porter Paterson, or "Duke," Emily's husband and the author's father, whose life appears to have been a string of drunken rages during which he heaped emotional abuse on his son and three daughters and anybody else who happened to be nearby.

The parents came from distinctly different lineages, Duke from a family of successful tradespeople with Yankee roots and Emily from an old-line Montgomery family, with all the skeletons in antebellum closets you might associate with, say, a Sartoris. Their passions ran deep, their conflicts volcanic; their fuel was alcohol.

After Emily's death, Judy remembers: "Duke no longer comes home every night, and I am bolted upright every morning with the premonition that the night before will have been one of those nights when his bed wasn't slept in. 'What is it that I must remember?' I ask my morning ghost as soon as consciousness strikes. 'Your mother is dead,' it says. 'Your father is gone and will never come back.' My losses stand all around me."

This is a grand excursion backward, warts and all, and of course forward, too, to the subsequent failures of Paterson and her two sisters and brother. Paterson, going home again, clearly pinpoints the dragon along her way, and of course it was not Emily or Duke or Mamie or Knoxville or others remembered and unremembered. The dragon was not the Old South (although with this book Paterson can lay clear claim to the status of Southern Writer) or slavery or class or cotton or your mother's underwear; it was booze and pills, and it burned a hole that could be filled only with the passion of teaching, of writing, of turning her attention to others and sharing her grotesques with us. ■