



Genealogy

By Maud Casey
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Introduction

Tolstoy's famous adage in *Anna Karenina* -- "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" -- could easily describe the Hennart family in Maud Casey's *Genealogy*. Bernard Hennart is an acerbic academic obsessed by his research into religious mystics of centuries past. His wife Samantha, once a gifted poet, finds herself unable to write, and fearful of her lack of maternal feelings. Shoving their anxieties beneath a brittle façade of unconventionality, Bernard and Samantha reside in a former train depot and quietly undermine each other under the guise of creating family games. It falls to their son Ryan to raise his younger sister Marguerite, but their sibling bond takes a complicated turn when sensitive Marguerite falls under the spell of her father's favorite mystic.

As a series of events sends each Hennart careening away from home, Samantha suffers a fatal brain aneurysm, alone. It is left to a relative stranger, Thompson, to accept the responsibility of sharing the tragic news with this shattered family, to help them come home for one last time. A compassionate, lyrical, examination of the ties that wound and bind, *Genealogy* is a masterful work from one of the finest novelists of her generation.

Questions for Discussion

1. A genealogy is generally defined as a record of ancestry, or a family tree. In the novel, how does Marguerite embody the Hennart genealogy?
2. Bernard is an academic and an atheist. Do you find his passionate interest in accounts of religious ecstasy and stigmata surprising? In trying to encourage his family "to aspire to this feeling, this thing beyond the everyday," has Bernard blundered?
3. A quote from Marguerite Porete, "humble, then, your wisdom, which is based on reason and place all your fidelity in those things which are given by love" is a constant refrain, a running theme, throughout the novel. Does Ryan recognize the truth of those words in Hyuen? Why is Bernard utterly unreceptive, despite his infatuation with mystics? How do the other characters respond?
4. The Hennarts are "a family that thrived on pretending to argue." But what do arguments about "Chopin's heart" and word games like "who's the most?" really engender? Do you think Bernard has intellectualized his family away from intimacy?
5. By embracing unconventionality and flouting family structure, by only occasionally pretending to be "like those other families we've only heard about," have the Hennart parents become unmoored from reality, and from each other? How does Ryan compensate for their neglect, and how does this ultimately damage both him and his sister?
6. Whenever the story shifts to Marguerite's perspective, does her tendency to take words literally ("Dr. Good Man"), unveil the layers of meaning normally ascribed to words to cover uncomfortable realities? Do you think she sees her love for Ryan as something akin to Louise Lateau's for God?
7. How do the alternating perspectives presented in *Genealogy* underscore the torturous complexity of familial relationships? Do you find it difficult to judge the characters when each viewpoint is empathetically revealed? Why do you think Samantha is so ambivalent about motherhood?

About the Author

Maud Casey is the author of *New York Times* Notable Book *The Shape of Things to Come* and short story collection *Drastic*. Her stories have appeared in *Gettysburg Review* and *Prairie Schooner* and she is a contributor to *The New York Times Book Review*, *Salon*, and *Newsday*. Currently, Casey is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Maryland, College Park, teaching fiction writing in their MFA program. She lives in Washington, DC.