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In this 1918 Pulitzer Prize winning story, widower Roger Gale struggles to deal with the way his children and grandchildren respond to the changing society. *His Family* is the story of a sixty-year-old New York man who reflects on his life and the lives of his three daughters. The women represent three separate types - one maternal, the second devoted to social movements, and the third living a happy and carefree existence - and the father sees something of himself in each.

His Family Details

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Sandy says

This engaging and endearing book, the winner of the first Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (in 1918), seems unfortunately to have slipped into the shadows. It is both gentle and powerful, a gripping story of the final couple of years in the life of Roger Gale -- his memories of and hopes for *His Family*.

Roger is a thoughtful and sensitive man, the father of three daughters. Illness had taken his wife Judith at a young age and Roger became a kind and conscientious single parent to three young daughters -- no mean task, I dare say, in New York City in the early 1900s. In the story, they are adults now and Roger spends a good deal of time pondering their differences, which focus mostly on their attitudes to motherhood. (view spoiler)

Roger struggles to understand and accept the choices of each of his daughters. I really admire him for his open-mindedness to "modern" attitudes and his ability to examine himself and his own opinions honestly. While he does not approve entirely of the choices of any of his daughters, he is able to recognize aspects of himself in their strengths and weaknesses and to accept each of them "warts and all" -- thereby accepting his own strengths and weaknesses also.

Like most people who are nearing the end of life, Roger frequently is visited by memories of years gone by. Through these forays into the past, the reader learns about Roger's childhood on a farm in the mountains of New Hampshire; his hunger for an exciting life; his carefree days as a young man in New York City; the early years of marriage; the struggle to keep his business afloat and provide for the needs of his children. But these memories also take the story into the future. (view spoiler)

The First World War breaks out about halfway through the story and this event, along with some personal crises, challenges Roger and his family. As they wrestle with these issues, relationships shift and change and Roger observes that his "family" is also changing. And finally, as he lies on his deathbed,

. . . with a breathless awe he knew that all the people who had ever lived on earth were before him in the void to which he himself was drifting: people of all nations, of countless generations reaching back and back and back to the beginnings of mankind: the mightiest family of all . . .

Until I perused the list of Pulitzer winners for a "prize-winners" challenge, I had never heard of Ernest Poole. Biographical information about him is very scarce although (like some other more famous authors of the time) he was an American journalist in Europe before and during World War One. He was apparently a radical thinker for his time, being strongly identified with socialism and sympathetic to the cause of the labour unions and, it seems, to the women's movement. Ernest Poole was a profound thinker, a man with an uplifting vision of what it means to be a part of creation, an author who should not be forgotten. If you read this book, you will not regret it.

Loretta says

I'm really baffled as to why and how this book won a Pulitzer Prize. I'd love to know what others books were

up for nomination at the time! It was a nice story about a seemingly nice family. The description of old New York in its hey day was quite enjoyable and certainly my cup of tea but I was truly bored and not really interested in any of the characters and I really wasn't entertained, at all.

Realini says

His Family by Ernest Poole

Very different perspectives on the world are presented in a very good book

There are some very poignant and difficult issues that are debated in this awarded book, in fact the first to receive the Pulitzer Prize.

Roger has a family that constitutes the name of this novel, consisting of three very different daughters and a belatedly adopted son.

He had a son of his own, but that boy died and so did his wife, albeit her widowed husband keeps thinking about her.

There are some recurring themes that make the reader think about his own vision, philosophy of life or just manner of behavior.

The three daughters of "His Family" have not just very different, but opposing mentalities and in the end-ways of life.

- The oldest is Edith who has as many children as possible – I guess they are about five, in any case too many from my perspective and even experience- I also have too many, even if covered with fur and feathers.
- Next in line would be Laura, who does not want any babies and espouses the hedonic understanding of life- we are to enjoy the moment and not care about the rest
- The last is the prototype of the unselfish, saint like woman, who acts like Mother Theresa and instead of a smaller family of her own opts for a large one made of thousands of children

The last but not least daughter is named Deborah and although she is the role model and her attitude is the most enviable and commendable one, I would say that I understand or empathize with her the least.

That is because as a selfish person I do not see myself as giving away all the time that I read for others.

It is also true that I had my own deceptions, when I got involved in the gated community that I live in, using my car, neglecting my family in the name of a higher, more important good of more people, only to get kicked and abused by the very guys I was planting trees, cleaning the streets, cutting the costs for.

There is a misunderstanding that I share with those around Deborah though and that has to do with doing good things for others.

Tal Ben Shahar who lectured at Harvard used to say that doing good to others is one of the most selfish things you can do- not in those words though.

Doing good for others returns, sometimes manifold, and you increase your level of happiness after that.

So the issue in the book is misplaced- Deborah's family feels that she sacrifices her happiness by caring for all those children- thousands of them.

In fact, her happiness could very well be increased all in a virtuous circle whereby what she gives comes back and forth, with an always increasing wellbeing.

Edith comes across as too involved with her own children to care for anything and anybody else, throwing out of the house a nice boy with a challenge is the word we use today, for what then called a handicap or crippling condition.

Laura marries twice to the outrage of the conservative entourage, who had very different views on divorce and women's rights in 1914.

That being said, it must be noted that Deborah is a woman of very advanced convictions, pleading and fighting for women's rights, to vote, to progress in what was called the feminist movement.

There are some sad events, deaths and illnesses, but this is a book with an optimistic message I guess, for it feels like it encourages a variety of views, without really condemning one way of thinking and letting all flourish in the end, even if to various degrees.

The hedonic philosophy has setbacks, but pulls through, as does the mother lioness, who takes her cubs to the country.

The most prominent figure, Deborah has some tough choices of her own- would she marry and have children of her own, or dedicate her life, like a nun, to serving others and a higher cause for the good of humanity?

This is a very good book.

Molly says

This is a gentle tale. Not a page turner, no major excitement. Just a beautifully written story of a loving family during the early years of the 20th century in New York City. The story is told through the eyes of 60 year old widow Roger Gale, of his three grown daughters – their joys and tribulations. Part of the charm of this book is that it was written in 1917, and you get a feel of that time in the ever growing city. Many of the themes though are timeless and are as current as today. I believe it was fully worthy of having won the first Pulitzer Prize award. For loving fathers everywhere, cheers to His Family.

Sara says

For everyone who thinks that women had no choices in 1918, here is a novel that begs to differ. In fact, the choices Roger Gale's three daughters make drive him quite crazy in this, the first ever Pulitzer Prize winner. He finds himself widowed and trying to understand and really get to know his three grown daughters. They are very different people, one a dedicated homemaker, one a passionate career woman/reformer, and the third a vacuous party girl who thinks more of money and position than anything else. During the course of the novel, he does forge an understanding of his family, and also a knowledge that their lives are their own and not his to manage anymore.

One of the major themes addressed is whether we live on after death in another realm, or whether our living on is something we do through our children and their children. To live on solely through our progeny is a bit of a depressing idea for me. In truth, our memory only survives, on average, two generations. There is not a single person on the face of this earth who ever knew my great-grandmother, and while she lives on in me genetically, I do not find that that is enough. And what of those who die young or have no children? In the end, I think Roger Gale discovers that it isn't an either/or proposition, and I agree with that.

While this book is a bit dated, it does open a door into the attitudes and thoughts of the middle class of the early 1900s. I found myself confronting a few stereotypes and misconceptions I have had about how men might have viewed their daughters in this time period. In the upper class, they were still items to be traded to keep money concentrated; in the poorer classes, they were drudges perhaps, enslaved to trying to keep families fed and afloat, but I found Roger's attitudes toward his daughters were very much in line with what someone of the 1950s middle class might have felt.

I felt there was a bit of unnecessary repetition toward the end and that the novel could, in fact, have been wound up sooner than it was. However, that did not detract appreciably from the experience of reading it and

I exited with something significant gained from the read. In my quest to read all the Pulitzer prize winners, I have discovered that this first winner was far from the least worthy.

Dawn says

Roger Gale, 60 years old, has been a widower for 15 years. He is living in the family home with his two youngest daughters, Deborah and Laura. A third daughter is married with 4 children and is expecting a 5th. The home is rapidly being surrounded by tall apartment buildings. Roger owns a business which he still actively manages. Roger has been in somewhat of a daze since the loss of his wife but thinks of her admonition to be involved in the lives of the children. The lives of Roger's 3 girls are very different and how he interacts with them is telling about his thoughts and feelings about his girls. Roger is a good man and he learns about himself and grows as he handles the situations and events that confront the girls and he expands as he learns more about his own desires.

Pclaiborn08 says

Although Poole seems to have good intentions with this story of an aging widower/father struggling to regain his foothold in the lives of his three adult daughters. Threads of truth concerning family dynamics as well as life truths can be found throughout the book, but are primarily overshadowed by aggressive stereotyping, providing for characters with limited growth and no ability to connect with the reader, as well as untiring repetition which eventually tires the reader.

Richard says

Given the history and prestige of the Pulitzer Prize, it bears remembering that the award for fiction got off to a somewhat shaky start. Established in 1917, the Pulitzer committee failed to award a prize for fiction/novel that year (a bad habit it can't seem to break even as recently as 2012), and the first true winner in this category, snagging the prize in 1918, was a work entitled *His Family* by Ernest Poole, a nice enough book but lacking in anything particularly outstanding or memorable to recommend it.

Just whose family are we talking about here? That would be one Roger Gale, an early 20th century resident of NYC and a relatively well-to-do widower and father of three grown daughters. *His Family* follows the last few years of Roger's life and the changes that take place within "his family" as well as changes in the world at large that touch the lives of Roger and his daughters. At the outset, Poole makes little effort to develop the daughters beyond flat, almost-clichéd character types. The oldest daughter, Edith, is the traditional mother raising 5 kids. The middle daughter Deborah is the do-gooder who is too busy saving the world (or in this case NYC's early 20th century immigrant caste) to be bothered with the mundane affairs of marriage or family. Laura, Roger's youngest daughter, is the self-absorbed social climber who increasingly flaunts her liberal (for her day) ideas. Roger, the dependable hub of the family wheel, watches with dismay as his daughters are flung further and further apart from him and from each other, tossed about by the inexorable and disquieting changes of the age. As crises of varying degrees present themselves, Roger attempts to reassure himself with the mantra of his late wife, "you will live on in the lives of your children". On the contrary, Roger gradually realizes (although he has probably suspected all along) that in the big picture, he

exerts about as much influence over the affairs of his daughters as he does over the turbulent world outside the four walls of his home. He comes to terms with this at about the same time he learns that his physical life is surely ebbing away. Ironically, as his life draws to an end, he wields the most influence over his family when he happily relinquishes responsibility for their well-being.

At the risk of reading something into the work that might not be there, I wonder if Poole unintentionally sheds light on an aspect of the sexism of that time, through one of the minor characters. If Roger finds any solace in the midst of the turmoil in his home, he finds it in a young man who is not part of "his family", the cripple Johnny Geer. In spite of his physical limitations, Johnny is everything that Roger's daughters are not: content with his life, devoid of drama, and just plain helpful to Roger. Johnny was like the son that Roger never had, and in the writing of his character, I thought Poole was making this subtle point: daughters and their affairs will drain you in a way that sons won't. This message is also reinforced, to a lesser degree, through Roger's interactions with his grandson George. Again, I may be unfairly assigning this particular intent to Poole's writing, but I find it curious that Roger's family is made up entirely of three very different daughters, each of whom manage to consume their father with more than their fair share of angst.

From the perspective of nearly 100 years later, it's easy to dismiss the first Pulitzer fiction winner as mostly forgettable. Enduring or not, the selection of any title for the Pulitzer is a history lesson in itself and therefore valuable beyond simply being an entry in the Pulitzer ledger. I suspect that the selection of Poole's book was a reflection of some of the anxieties of the age, if not Poole's own. Women's Suffrage would finally be realized in a few years, and women were no longer resigned to merely fill Edith's role, as noble and important as it was. Men, especially fathers, weren't quite so sure what to make of it all, and we've been losing sleep over our daughters ever since.

Emily says

This novel received the first Pulitzer Prize for the Novel in 1918...I am restarting my quest to read all of the winners. A recent drought in "good reads" led me on a trip to the library. After scanning the M. Atwood Shelf (I had read all the ones there) and walking aimlessly through the rest of the fiction area, I decided to dive back into Pulitzer Prize winners. Why not start with the first one!

This book was a bit slow and slightly melodramatic for my taste, but I still enjoyed it. Ironically, the economic hardship of the times, foreign war, and solving the public education crisis are still very timely issues. This was the backdrop for a story about a man and his three grown daughters. Each daughter brought a different viewpoint and honestly, a still relevant viewpoint, about a woman's life. One was a stay at home mother raising children and being very closely tied in to their lives (think over the top PTA mom), another: the never been married career woman who dedicates her life to social good by running an inner city public school (all the children are her children) and finally: the youngest, materialistic divorcee daughter who spends time in Europe with her second husband. It's interesting how little humans change in 100 years. (this is all just occurring to me as I write this) This book would be an interesting pick for a discussion-I wonder if it is ever studied in a Women in Literature class...

Read this if:

You too, are trying to read all of the PP winners!

Martin says

One of my favorite Pulitzer winning pieces of fiction. The story of a late, middle-aged man who lives in NYC and maintains the family farm in New Hampshire. He learns about "modern" life from his 3 very different daughters, a liberal-minded teacher, a shallow socialite and a prudish housewife/widow.

This is a wonderful story which reminds me at times of E.L. Doctorow's Ragtime, in that it encompasses the scope of life in early twentieth century New York, and the lives of the people who inhabit it. The descriptions are vivid but never too cumbersome; the characters are all very real, and the plot flies by. By the end, I came to care about what happens to these people, and found I was sorry when it was over.

Joshua Walcher says

I'm flabbergasted.

If you would have told me that I'd give this book a 4-star review when I was 50% through the book or even 75% of the way through the book, I would have laughed and told you that you must be thinking of some other book...not this one.

Ernest Poole must've lived through some serious family drama. Because man...this guy gets it. Never have I been so uncomfortable reading a book as I was when Roger's three daughters each tried to "fix" the other two with their ideas of how they should be living their lives.

Sometimes there are no easy answers.

Sometimes just surviving until tomorrow is enough.

And sometimes that isn't possible.

To all the people over the years that said this book shouldn't have won the Pulitzer, go eat a hat. This book led me by the hand through a tour of early 1900's New York, introduced me to the people of the times, ripped me up inside, put me back together, and gave me a kiss on the forehead.

Katrisa says

Ugh, this book was a chore to finish. I wouldn't have even bothered to finish it except I'm trying to read all the Pulitzer fiction winners. I think it was especially hard to read because all the other books I'm reading right now are awesome.

Johan Patrick Sy says

[because I'm still young and YA is my genre (hide spoiler)]

Melody says

Gem of a book that covers topics that are timely today.

This story revolves around a man with 3 daughters: the homemaker, the career woman, and the party girl. He attempts to come to terms with who they are and the changes they represent in families, morality, the workplace, and culture.

One theme that runs through this is immigration: the career woman is a school administrator in tenement neighborhoods of New York City before and during WWI. The discussion of immigration nearly 100 years ago mirrors themes we hear in discussions of immigration today.

We also hear today's burning issues echoed in the discussion of daughters: For the career woman, think Hillary Clinton and the flak she attracts by not being a stay-at-home mom. For the party girl, think Paris Hilton. And for the homemaker, think of the traditionalists and their criticism of the Clintons and Hiltons of the world.

Some of the writing is dated, but the story is insightful. Read it...

Andrew says

His Family won the Pulitzer Prize in 1918. This is because there were only three books published that year in the entire world.

There's a lot of heart in the novel, and it means well...it's just laughably bad at points. Roger is supposed to be an old-fashioned father who doesn't understand this crazy new world. He's at his wit's end with his daughters not conforming to societal standards. Who are these heathens not having 10 kids by the time they're 30?!?! He gruffs, growls and grunts his way through the entire book. Yet he can't stay mad for more than two pages at a time. At most.

Seriously, Roger gets pissed off, one of his daughters will laugh at his cantankerous ways and his heart is immediately melted. Repeat for 400 pages.

Random thoughts: the last two chapters were pretty good. The "Cripple" is made to be an important character, yet he's vastly undercooked and disappears for many chapters at a time. Does Ernest Poole know what Roger does for a living? Last of all...Deborah's family!

Jean Carlton says

3-

The repetitive and obvious theme of 'life goes on' (and on and on) became a bit boring to me at first but it pulled me in as I found passages to which I could relate as a parent. Roger, aging patriarch, is looking back on his life after the death of his wife. Only then does he get to know his adult daughters. Major themes which cross all generations are the uniqueness of each of his children, the tendency of parents to meddle in their lives and decisions (all for their own good, of course!), the idea (hope) that we parents will 'live on in them'

even after we are gone, that our role may be to teach and model behavior for them but that they also teach US, that parents may have 'favorites' but that can change with the wind, that parents sometimes have feelings that are not acceptable...they don't really like their children all the time. Ordinary prose interspersed with exceptional passages often enough to keep interest...especially the descriptive and poignant ending. I find it interesting that only upon the death of his wife was he, the father, awakened to the lives of his children....it had been 'forced upon him' and it ultimately renewed his soul. Still true today, though I believe less so, is the distant father when it comes to interactions with the children.

Erika says

I found this book to be both really interesting and really problematic.

On the plus side, it's a fascinating look at New York during a transformative time in history. The characters' opinions about women, poverty, education, sex and technology is like a snapshot of the era, so much so that I think this novel would be great as required reading for a college class on American history. On the minus side, it has some major structural problems and I agree with other reviewers who said the themes are hammered on again and again.

Still, I'm glad I read it. I learned a lot and was never bored.

Mark says

His Family, the first Pulitzer Prize winning novel, is a drama that explores the trials and challenges of family life against the backdrop of the rapidly changing world of the early 20th century. Set in New York in 1914, Roger Gale is widower with three grown daughters, who each possess traits he sees in himself. As he emerges from the grief and depression of losing his wife, he turns to his daughters, remembering his wife's advice that "you will live on in our children's lives." He comes to learn that this not merely as a legacy once he himself is gone, but a way for him to flourish in his remaining days.

Each of his daughters have families of their own, which symbolize the transitional era in which they live. Edith has a traditional family and can't look beyond her own children's well being. Deborah's "family" numbers in the thousands, as she is a school principal in the impoverished tenement neighborhoods and champions social reform. In this way she is the "modern woman", the opposite of Edith's old fashioned ways. And young Laura, who cares about nothing but her own pleasure, embraces the family she's found in the elite social circles of New York. Roger's changing opinion of his daughters through the course of the book is fascinating.

The basic themes of evolving generations, the role of women in society, the moral responsibility of humans to one another and the transition of old fashioned living to the complexity of modern urban life are explored. Most of the drama plays out in Roger's home, where he raised his family, and where his daughters now occasionally live to cultivate their own. I would have liked more descriptions of urban New York and life in the 1910s, but having the home as the nucleus of the story is really the main point.

The book is written in a style that feels corny at times, but there are some very moving passages, and some of the messages hold true today as well as they did 90 years ago. It's well worth reading.

Elizabeth A.G. says

As the 1918 Pulitzer Prize for the Novel winner, "His Family" by Ernest Poole is a wonderful, quiet, engaging story of the Gayle family in early 20th century New York involving a widower father, Roger Gayle, and his three grown daughters, Edith, Deborah, and Laura. Family relationships; how unlike siblings can be; participation or lack thereof in the development and care of one's children; the experience of family members leaving the nest & creating their own lives; concerns with death and the legacy we leave our children -- ("You will live on in our childrens' lives" is a statement the deceased wife used to repeat and which Roger Gayle quotes several time in the story.) -- the rapid changes in society with the rapid growth of New York, the suffering of the poor living in the tenements, the effects of WWI on lives and the economy; and the expanding roles and careers of women outside of the family are all themes touched upon and make this story seem very relevant today. The book is beautifully written with good characterization. I found myself drawn into and caring about how their lives will turn out. A well-deserved Pulitzer for a novel that has sadly been over looked.

Spencer says

If you're looking for a good "book group book", *His Family* is a good choice. Set in 1913-1916 New York City, it tells the tale of Roger Gale, a 16 year widower, and his three daughters. Edith, 36, married with 4 children, and soon to be 5, has an insular view of her family. She focuses all her attention on maximizing the health, comfort and security of her family, at the expense of not experiencing the outside world. Deborah, 29, is single and a highly motivated principal of a large public school in NYC. Her students are largely from the burgeoning tenement class. She is a progressive suffragette, and a subscriber to modern educational theories. Her devotion to her vocation makes the possibility of a family very troublesome. Youngest daughter Laura, 26, is artistic, likes the theater, and is a modern, free and open-minded spirit. Unlike her deceased mother, father, and sisters, she is more aware and open about female sexuality. She marries into a relationship that her father can only call a ménage.

Roger swore on his wife Judith's deathbed to "stay close to his family", but he has not kept his promise. He is spiritually bankrupt, and no longer believes in a life after death. A severe financial jolt awakens him and he starts to see a spiritual re-growth. His spirits are uplifted by his youngest daughter, and his grandchildren. We see how his concept of family evolves with time and shifting circumstances. Not only the depth of familial relations are explored but also their breadth. He is troubled by the changes he sees taking place in the city because of the "huddled masses", the rise of tenements, and creeping socialism. He has been able to provide a comfortable upper middle class environment for his family through his self-created newspaper "clipping service". The start of the World War creates some sudden changes to the status quo that have some far-reaching consequences for his family.

An on again, off again courtship relationship involving his daughter Deborah, consumes much of his waking moments. Dramatic changes in Edith's family status trouble Roger even more. Laura is not without marriage problems as well. Health concerns throw a monkey wrench into family functioning. Changing family financial status brings the family to the point of social and psychological collapse.

The family explores hidden resources in order to survive. Roger's ring collection figures prominently and we learn its significance in his life. Assets that they had taken for granted for years are suddenly discovered and

grant the family new hope. We see an evolution of the role of the family for Roger as he deals with maintaining the peace amongst the various family members, which becomes very challenging and body weakening. Roger is constantly reminded how Judith always said, "We live through our children."

Looking forward to my next book group discussion, I am optimistic that this will be one of our best discussions over the last 12 years.
