



A Family Daughter

Maile Meloy

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Maile Meloy's debut novel, *Liars and Saints*, captured the hearts of readers and critics alike. Now Meloy returns with a novel even more dazzling and unexpected than her first. *A Family Daughter* is a brilliantly entertaining, powerfully moving novel about families, love, and the desire to reimagine one's own history.

It's 1979, and seven-year-old Abby, the youngest member of the close-knit Santerre family, is trapped indoors with the chicken pox during a heat wave. The events set in motion that summer will span decades and continents, as the Santerres become entangled with an aging French playboy, a young Eastern European prostitute, a spoiled heiress, and her ailing jet-set mother. With elegant precision, Meloy takes us through the world of this changeable family, its values and taboos, its heartbreak and bitterness and fierce devotion.

A rich, full novel about passion and desire, fear and betrayal, *A Family Daughter* illuminates both the joys and complications of contemporary life and the relationship between truth and fiction. For everyone who has yet to meet the Santerres, unmatched pleasure awaits.

A Family Daughter Details

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From Reader Review A Family Daughter for online ebook

hayden says

3.5 stars. a bit messier than *liars and saints*, but still great. the two novels intersect in such interesting ways—either is readable on its own, but together, they form such an original, interesting whole. definitely looking forward to more from ms. meloy.

Cynthia says

This is the story of a girl growing up in a loving, caring, dysfunctional and intermittently Catholic family. Abby's mother is possibly the most damaged family member but definitely the least stable as a parent. Thankfully Abby has a responsible, loving father but then tragedy strikes and she's on her own....no worse, she has to parent her mom. She somehow gets through it and becomes a writer. In her first book Abby interweaves family fact and fiction leaving everyone debating what's real. I love Meloy and thought her 2009 short story collection 'Both Ways is the Only Way that I Want It' was one of the best books of that year. I also loved her previous short stories 'Half in Love' which was only a smidgen below the quality of 'Both Ways' but 'A Family Daughter', though well written, felt self indulgent, as if Meloy used it to get things off her chest. There was a central theme that was horrifying and that felt pointless unless the point was to normalize such behavior. I'm not against including unpleasant issues but not to make the ambiguity ok. There are some things it's not all right to be on the fence about.

I'm rating this book as a 3 but it's more like a 3.5. Meloy is wonderful and I think she's going to give us many great books in the coming years. If you were disappointed with this book please read some of her stories. Though more recent books share the similar theme of looking at the gray areas of life rather than seeing in only black and white she explores the shadows with more aplomb in her short stories.

Alicia says

While I appreciated the spare clean storytelling style of Maile Meloy I wasn't wowed by the novel. After I put it down I didn't think about it or ponder it again.

Jamie says

My God. You want to have your head fucked with a little bit? Read this book after reading Liars and Saints. Seriously.

Okay, so I LOVE Liars and Saints. That book is like a religious experience for me; I could go back to it every year and never get tired of it. So I obviously wanted to read A Family Daughter, just because it was also by Maile Meloy. And then I started to read this, and I was a little confused. Because it was also about the Santerre family, but then... it wasn't. Or was it? And then I realized something - Maile Meloy is so kick-

ass I'll never be able to get my head around it.

Because instead of writing a sequel to *Liars and Saints*, she wrote a companion, a book about the same characters in which their lives take a different path. What if Character X (don't want to spoil things) didn't die, like in *Liars and Saints*? What if she instead became the main character of *A Family Daughter*? What if she wrote a book in *A Family Daughter* that is (in such an act of metafiction postmodernism that it makes me giggle and hug myself in excitement) the story of what happens in *Liars and Saints*? So many what ifs, so many mind-blowing moments... I love love love you, Maile Meloy. You make my day.

Kathleen says

Written in 2006, “*A Family Daughter*” turns Meloy’s 2003 “*Liars and Saints*,” a novel about a Catholic family keeping secrets from one another, upside down. Wonderfully complicated, creative and inventive, this novel explains “*Liars and Saints*” was a work of fiction written by Abby, a grand daughter; “*A Family Daughter*” surfaces the buried memories/secrets/old hurts and rolls out the attempts of the multi-generational Santerra family as they knowingly or not seek understanding, resolution and redemption.

I bookmarked so many passages within the novel that I know will not mean as much to another reader; Meloy’s writing captivates me. Yvette, the matriarch, trying valiantly to hold the family together and yet, missing her father all her life following the time when she left Canada and married Teddy in 1942...”She had thought she could leave her attachment to him behind, when the war began and she moved to California...and time passed so quickly and her father died of the old wound. She had missed so many years of his life, and he had missed so many of hers. It was her war injury, and it had worked its way out a little, in her heart. If she had sat very still, it might not do any more damage.”

Yvette explaining to Abby while Abby seeking forgiveness...”We try so hard as parents, honey. We try to do better than our own parents did. But we carry those hurts with us...”

Leila Tirrett to Abby...”This wanting to please everyone – it isn’t fair to give other people so much power. You tempt the greediest part of them.”

Abby to Peter...”Czeslaw Milosz said that when a writer is born into a family, the family is finished.”...”I keep thinking I brought a curse upon my family. I murdered my grandmother in a book, and I must be punished, but God has a sense of irony, so he took Teddy.”

The parallels to the first novel are too many to note. We meet many characters who are absolute train wrecks, and yet over and over again, a mother’s love for a child is a “physical pull,” the redemptive piece. Comedic in so many places, the self absorption and self indulgence of characters often astounded me (e.g., Clarissa’s film.) “They’ve never paid any attention to me...they’ve never seen me...How can they love me if they don’t see me?”

The final chapter parallels the first novel with all the players gathered in the family home following a funeral. A daughter has spoken at her father’s funeral...”You do want so much more for your children than life will ever offer them. He (Teddy, the father) wanted life to be understandable, and morally unambiguous, and not filled with strife. The defining event of his life was the war but he wanted...to be a channel of peace.

He wanted to trust in God and saw faith and love like St. Francis which is difficult always to do.” Circling back to the novel’s beginning, there are conflicting feelings shared about wanting to stay and wanting to go, musings about what makes a good life, about moving on or lapsing into sadder behaviors, but the family has come together in the end (just as in the “novel”) because of a death.

Dave says

Meloy missed on this one. It's still a page turner because she's got ridiculous talent when it comes to crafting a sentence, but the plotting came straight out of a romance novel. A family of not terribly interesting or likeable Californians with origins there and in Quebec sleep with strangers, professors, Eastern European prostitutes, South American heiresses, old flames, and each other. (The incest plot in *Liars & Saints* was odd and brief - here it drives a huge portion of the book. Really?) Throw in one of the characters spending time writing a novel and you see a lot of evidence that this novel was contrived and, to be frank, lazy. (I realize some may think it's creative to have a character in this book pen a novel which is clearly *Liars & Saints*. I thought it was duplicative.) "Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want It" is great. "*Liars & Saints*" is good. "*A Family Daughter*" is just not in the same league as either book and can be safely skipped.

Bookmarks Magazine says

Those expecting a sequel to the well-received *Liars and Saints* will instead find a truthful antidote (sort of) to that novel. Abby died in that novel, but in this one, she's a novelist who penned her past. It's a conceit that bothered some critics, who saw a lost opportunity for Meloy to offer insight into the boundaries between fact and fiction. Others thought Abby's novel, *Liars and Saints*, a brilliant plot device. Either way, readers will not be disappointed in the individual melodramas of *A Family Daughter*. Like its predecessor, it's filled with lots of bad behavior and many (too many?) characters. In the end, *A Family Daughter* may not stand up to its predecessor, but it's still an absorbing—and voyeuristic—read.

This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

Jessica says

Awesome

Ben Babcock says

Once upon a time I sat down to read a book called *Liars and Saints*, which I had noticed in a piece in *TIME* magazine. I had bought the book with the intent of giving it as a gift, but after reading it I thought better: although not completely terrible, *Liars and Saints* possessed nothing to recommend it, inhabiting that wasteland of contrived implausibilities that seems to be the home of so much literary fiction. Generations pass in a matter of pages, sex is had, and babies get made. It was rather standard, rather bland fare for that type of novel.

Apparently I am a robot who merely follows his to-read list unquestioningly: *A Family Daughter* was on the list; it was available at my library; I borrowed it. I didn't look at the description, so it wasn't until I started reading and saw the names "Abby" and "Yvette". Those sounded vaguely familiar—was this a sequel? A prequel? What had I gotten myself into?

It turns out *A Family Daughter* is related to Maile Meloy's previous novel, but not in the conventional sense. Instead, it swallows the universe of *Liars and Saint*, which turns out to be a somewhat-fictional family history as written by this book's version of Abby Collins! This is very meta, and normally **I love metafiction**. Maybe it's a holdover from my days of high school drama class and a perverse fascination with breaking the fourth wall; certainly I like when authors self-deprecatingly portray themselves or their own work in the story. However, the simple metafictional nature of *A Family Daughter* is nowhere near intriguing enough to save it from its numerous flaws.

I got out the sticky notes around page 6. I don't ordinarily take notes while reading, resorting to a sticky only when I need to ensure I can find a specific page—usually for a quotation. Sometimes I use stickies while reading non-fiction, in order to remind myself of points I want to address in my review. When I break out the stickies en masse for fiction, it's usually a bad sign: I'm not just going to criticize this book; I'm going to *itemize* my criticism.

The sticky on page 6 reads, "One-line descriptions" and was prompted by this passage:

Yvette stood at the kitchen counter wondering what part of her daughter's selfishness was her fault. Had she not given Clarissa enough attention when she was Abby's age? Had her other children distracted her—Margot, who was older and perfect, and Jamie, who was younger and troubled?

I don't want to make too much of this, because all writers make choices, and sometimes the best choice *is* the most expedient one. And I admit that my recollection of *Liars and Saints* did not leave me favourably disposed to this book. However, I still balk when I read the above passage, not because it's particularly bad writing, but because it just seems to pigeonhole this book as "literary" more than any genre snobbery on my part could. Through these pithy and simplistic descriptions, Meloy reminds us that we don't really need to pay attention to these characters, because they are all just stereotypes and caricatures. In general, the characters in this book are either flat and unremarkable—like Peter, the TA and Abby's sometime love interest—or completely unbelievable—like Saffron, Katya, et al. Teddy, the Santerre family patriarch, is a textbook case of the crotchety old man:

The receptionist had a nice voice, and dark hair. Teddy made an appointment on a computer screen to have somebody's grandson put a sonic probe into his eyes and then suck out the lens and put in a folded-up new one, and he gave the pretty woman Yvette's e-mail address. He had begun life, he reflected, with the radio, the telegraph, and the Victrola, and he had been perfectly happy with those.

(I swear it wasn't just because of that last line that I chose to highlight this passage, although it does make the technophile in me cringe.) I think Meloy is trying to be funny here, or at least cute, with such turns of phrase as "somebody's grandson". Alas, it falls flat, because it might be entertaining, but it does nothing to deepen Teddy's character. Throughout the book, he is this one-note instrument: he's disappointed with his son for never making anything of his life; he's chronically unable to perceive Clarissa's flirtation with lesbianism; he has, in general, checked out of much of family life because of his aging senses.

I'll say this for *Liars and Saints*: at least the stories of more of its characters were accessible. *A Family Daughter* follows mostly Abby and Jamie, with brief but unsatisfying detours toward Clarissa and a therapist (more on her later). We get a glimpse at Teddy's backstory, and a little more from Yvette, but that's about it. This is not the multigenerational story that *Liars and Saints* aspired to be—and that would be fine, if it stood alone. Since it seems to inhabit a parallel universe, I feel adrift: how much do I really know about *this* Teddy? How much can I assume is the same as what I learned about him in *Liars and Saints*? There are all these echoes in my mind, and I'm not sure what's real.

I kind of like the therapist character, if only because it's so rare for a book with characters in therapy to show us the other side of the table, so to speak. Meloy writes, "Leila Tirrett was a psychologist with a Ph.D. and problems of her own", and aside from attempting to sound ironic, I like that she humanizes the character this way. Suddenly she's no longer just a third party who listens to Abby's problems and confessions: she's a real person, with her own issues, and Abby is just the latest patient in her life.

Small moments like the one above prevent me from condemning *A Family Daughter* completely. Like *Liars and Saints*, it is not so much terrible as just unremarkable. That might sound weird, considering that this book is full of improbable events. There's a Romanian orphan who turns out to be the son of a Hungarian prostitute—who wants him back. Jamie ends up marrying the mother and adopting the orphan, and they move from Argentina to the United States to attempt a happily ever after ending (I will let you guess how that works for them). There's a reason that we say truth is often stranger than fiction, for we tend to require our fiction be realistic, that events flow logically from their cause. When they don't, it becomes absurd. Mixing absurdism with attempts to create powerful dramas is a dangerous business. Adept authors can come up with something akin to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, but most of the time, you get something more along the lines of *The Hitman Diaries*. I know where *A Family Daughter* lies along this spectrum.

I would like to think that Meloy is attempting something clever and, yes, risky. Her metafictional novel-within-the-novel, while not entirely novel to me, is still an intriguing premise that should have gone a long way to making me enjoy this book. Unfortunately, the plot and characters themselves are just *so literary* in the most pretentious sense of that term; their problems are *larger* than life. I don't want to sound like I'm coming down on all literary fiction everywhere. However, this book demonstrates some of the common flaws in literary fiction that will make me harder on a book of its ilk. Nobody ever stops having sex. Nobody ever says, "Gee, I could avoid this drama if I just talk to someone." To her credit, Meloy keeps the drama below "hysterical" levels, and so *A Family Daughter* feels only contrived, not truly absurd. Much with *Liars and Saints*, this is a bland novel whose structure is intriguing but whose semiotics remain insufferable.

Richard Pittman says

I went back and forth on this one as I was reading it, and then settled on a generally positive view of the book. I should point out that I have not read the "companion" book to *A Family Daughter*, "Liars and Saints", so there are elements here I did not quite get until I read up a little on it. I picked this book up from the library almost at random, because the book I wanted was not in. This one was displayed face-out on the shelves and looked interesting enough, so I got it.

It seems to me that Ms. Meloy must have written *Liars and Saints* and then decided that it would be nice to tell the story of the same characters in a different way, so came up with the conceit of another novel that is the "true to life" version of the fictional novel. Of course it isn't really true to life, but that's not the point. I'm not sure what the point is, exactly, though. Is the point simply that Ms. Meloy wanted to re-tell the first story in a way that wasn't quite beholden to what happened in that novel? It's perfectly fine if that's the case, but I wonder also if there is supposed to be a larger point of the two novels combined.

This novel has two primary protagonists, Abby and Jamie. Abby is college-aged for most of the events of the novel, and Jamie is in his early 30s in the same time period and is having a difficult time getting his adulthood started. They are uncle and niece. I liked them and the cast of supporting characters, including Abby's mother Clarissa who has been having a mid-life crisis since the time Abby was a small child, Yvette the grandmother who tried to gently instill religion into her children and has seen it entirely fail to take, both in the literal sense and in that none of her children seem to have any direction in life, Margot who is the "good" child but experiences her own mid-life crisis, and Jamie's two girlfriends who are similar and opposed. I think Margot's story was my favorite.

What I did not like, and do not like in general, was the shifting perspectives. Meloy shifts between no fewer than 11 characters over the course of the story including 5 who are not part of the Santerre family. This is a modern trend that I think has gotten overused and overplayed and this novel may be Exhibit A of that. It is jarring, and tends to devolve into a lot of "tell, don't show" writing. How do we know Katya's motivations? Her couple of chapters tell us directly! Why do we need it? We don't. I think in particular it would have been nice if we had gotten Margot's story through the eyes of our primary protagonists instead of through her own and that of a minor character whose involvement I won't spoil. We should not have gotten into the heads of the non-family members at all, except through the perspectives of family members.

Still, this is a good read. Maile Meloy is clearly a talented writer and story teller and my criticisms above won't stop me from reading more of her work.

Florinda says

There are actually quite a few daughters who figure prominently in the story: Santerre family matriarch Yvette's daughters Margot and Clarissa, daughters-in-law Saffron and Katya, and especially Clarissa's daughter Abby, who is at the center of it all. The Santerre women were introduced in Maile Meloy's earlier novel, *Liars and Saints*, and the basic framework for this story was laid out there as well. However, I don't think it's required to read the earlier novel before this one, since *A Family Daughter*'s perspective is different. In some ways, the two books taken together remind me of *Mona Simpson's* approach to the family in

Anywhere but Here and The Lost Father - companion pieces as opposed to a series. Reading them in order is helpful, but not strictly necessary to understanding the characters' history, because this book isn't primarily about what happens.

I read Liars and Saints during my spring vacation last year, and was absolutely sucked into it - so much so that I didn't want to read the follow-up right away. I needed some distance. However, I may have waited a little too long; I didn't like A Family Daughter quite as much as I wanted to, or expected to. I think Meloy may have spread her story a little thin this time, spending too much time with some characters and not enough with others. I felt more distant from the Santerres this time around, but maybe my expectations were just a bit too high.

Meloy has a spare writing style that I find appealing, and while I think she draws characters very well, I felt that she could have filled them in a little more in this book. However, I still found the characters and their story emotionally affecting. There's a lot of personal drama that would verge on soap-operatic in some other authors' hands, but Meloy is good at portraying drama with minimal melodrama. A Family Daughter has enough plot to make it a fast and involving read, with enough emotional resonance to make it memorable. However, if you decide to read both books, you might not want to take as much time between them as I did.

Caroline says

There is something a little "writing assignment" about this pair of books, but I found the characters rich and fascinating.

Jess says

This companion to Liars and Saints neatly turns the first one on its head. Like the first one, it manages to encompass vast periods of time in a few pages, and it delivers on the emotion without feeling like an over-the-top saga. I enjoyed revisiting the characters, and seeing how things could be different. I couldn't help but wonder if people had speculated about any autobiographical elements in Liars and Saints, and if that prompted her to write this one. Which is funny because whether or not it was autobiographical never crossed my mind until Abby dealt with the same issue in this one. I think this one would be best appreciated if you've read Liars and Saints first.

C Hawley says

This book is a kind of sequel to Liars and Saints. It chronicles the different members of a family, one of whom writes a semi-fictional account of her family's history and trials. But maybe I just liked it because of my own personal experience with people who write "fictional" accounts of their lives and families...

Judy says

I'm a fan of Meloy's writing. She's an excellent storyteller, and her characters are well-drawn, quirky and

engaging. This book is the companion novel to *Liars and Saints* - so if you like that book, you'll enjoy reading more about this family across the generations.
