

The Pain of Orphanhood

ORPHANS: REAL AND IMAGINARY

By Eileen Simpson

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REVIEWED BY SHEILA KOREN

Psychotherapist Eileen Simpson is the author of "The Maze," "Reversals" and the widely acclaimed "Poets in their Youth." She now has crafted a sensitive, insightful and beautifully written memoir of her own childhood without parents that is also a literary, social and psychological history of orphanhood. Drawn as it is from a wealth of experience, both personal and scholarly, "Orphans" offers a unique perspective on a subject rarely explored in an era most notable for child custody battles between separated parents.

"But there are no orphans anymore," says a switchboard operator at the convent orphanage in Dobbs Ferry, New York, where Simpson spent several years of her childhood. "Parents don't die young anymore." Nevertheless, contends the author, homeless, abused and neglected children are today's orphans, as "unsponsored and unsupported" as she and her sister Marie were after the death of their parents.

The full impact of her own orphanhood did not surface, Simpson writes, until the death of her husband. Similarly, the death of parents later in life leaves many a middle-aged orphan with what philosopher Bertrand Russell (an orphan himself) describes as "a curious wild pain — a searching for something beyond what the world contains."

Quoting Thomas DeQuincy — "It is, or is not, according to the nature of men, an advantage to be orphaned at an early age" — Simpson keeps her book from becoming a maudlin account of the suffering of the parentless. She includes Lady Backnell's remark in Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Ernest" that "to lose one parent may be regarded as unfortunate. To lose both looks like carelessness." She reveals that, "safely dead," her mother "was

never a nag, never talked too much, and never voiced prejudices I found shocking." She gives as much credence to the comic strip "Little Orphan Annie" as to the orphaned characters of Dickens, Kipling, Bronte, Sartre, Twain or Beckett.

Among the valuable psychological perspectives about orphanhood presented in "Orphans" is an analysis of the "Bulldogs Bank Six," refugee children of the Holocaust, and their search for connectedness ("Bist du mein?" asks one child of all prospective parents). Simpson is also concerned by the "exquisite vulnerability" of orphanhood that can produce people who are either "anxiously attached or cold and inhibited." And she provides excellent illustrations of the lack of sibling rivalry among orphans, since "adults played so little part in our affective lives that we did not compete with each other for their favors and affections."

Simpson's description of the primacy and importance of her relationship with her sister Marie, who curiously also became a psychologist, includes a fortunately unsuccessful attempt by an insensitive would-be adoptive parent to separate the two sisters. From this, Simpson provides valuable social data for dealing with sibling foster children today.

While it is true that a white infant orphan is an anachronism, thousands of minority and older children (over age two or three), including many siblings, still suffer what Simpson calls "the direct disadvantage" of institutionalized orphanhood: Even in the homes of families, she writes, parents "had the power to soften the discipline, slow the tempo, make exceptions. They bestowed affection on their children, offered them special tidbits at the table ... took account of what suited them, took account of their preferences ... felt no need to disguise their preferences ... unashamedly preferred their own children. Orphans were outsiders." ■

San Francisco writer Sheila Koren is a health counselor and foster parent.