

"It seems we humans carry the weight of our dad's short-comings. I know-mine left when I was nine. Don writes with candid humor and unembarrassed honesty. He rips himself open. This book sings to those who have felt responsible for their father's demons. The truth is, our real Father is perfect in every way, especially in his love for us. Thanks Don and John. This book spoke to a place deep inside of me."

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—New Man magazine

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"This book is vintage Miller. He once again opens up his heart and lets it bleed with honesty."

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To Own A Dragon REFLECTIONS ON GROWING UP WITHOUT A FATHER

DONALD MILLER & JOHN MACMURRAY



The Navigators is an international Christian organization. Our mission is to reach, disciple, and equip people to know Christ and to make Him known through successive generations. We envision multitudes of diverse people in the United States and every other nation who have a passionate love for Christ, live a lifestyle of sharing Christ's love, and multiply spiritual laborers among those without Christ.

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Dedicated to men who are mentoring younger men

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PROLOGUE

've never written a prologue before, but near as I can tell this is where an author explains a book's shortcomings and asks the reader's kindness. This book has many deficiencies, and I am sorry for them. If it helps you to know I wrote the book in one sitting, on a plane leaving Pittsburgh for Los Angeles, I would ask you to keep this in mind. It's not true, but the thought may help.

I also want to say something to the women who will attempt this book. I am delighted you have chosen to join us, and you are more than welcome, though you must kindly accept my apology for aiming the text at less agreeable creatures. It is not that I think women are less affected by the absence of a father, only that I have relied on personal experience. I think we would all agree inking a stroke toward the

feminine would have been a financial move rather than a personal exploration of the issue. I might have sold more books but it would have exposed the fact I know nothing about women, save their lovely smell. So, the decision to target a male audience will explain the simple vocabulary, short chapters, and bathroom humor. I only hope when you come across the latter, you will be honored to remember I would never have been so offensive if I'd known you were in the room.

A note should be made about the voice of the book and the way John and I went about it. I lived with John and his family for four years, and learned a great deal while I was there. In thinking about what to say to young men who grew up without fathers, I relied on many of the principles I learned from John. In putting the book together, then, John and I would talk through issues and I would write each chapter with these conversations in mind. The voice is mine, but the wisdom is his.

That said, this book has been healing for me to get on paper. A writer learns more from what he writes than the reader, and often applies the perspectives after the book is written. We're a depraved group in that way. As for the healing, I hope something like my experience in writing this book happens to you in the reading. It means a great deal to John and me that you would want to spend time with us, and we are grateful.

THE REPLACEMENTS: WE'VE GOT MEN ON THE GROUND

n the absence of a real father, I had a cast of characters that were at times hilarious, pitiful, perfect, kind, and wise.

Here they are:

My first father was a black man on television who wore bright argyle sweaters. He lived in New York or Chicago, I can't remember which. He was incredibly intelligent, and had a knockout wife. I'm talking about Bill Cosby. When I was a kid, I wanted to be Theo Huxtable. I liked the way Theo dressed. I liked that he was confident with women and even though he didn't make good grades still felt good about himself, and he had good-looking sisters who were

both older and younger and who always gave him encouragement and advice about life, along with safe male-female tension. I liked that Bill Cosby had money, too, tons of cash and certain philosophies about saving and spending that gave the family a sense of security, which turned his knockout wife on and had her singing slow, sultry blues melodies to him from the bed while he brushed his teeth in the master bathroom. Bill Cosby never panicked about small things, he never got worked up about broken windows or cereal on the floor, and if he did get worked up, it was more like a comedy routine than a drunken rampage. He also laughed at himself, which was endearing, and I would sit in front of the little black-and-white television in my room and live vicariously through the made-up life of the Huxtables, who had celebrity guests coming through the house every few episodes to play the trombone or tap-dance.

My mom was great, don't get me wrong, but the only guests we ever had at our house were from the singles group at church, and none of them ever whipped out a trombone to play "When the Saints Go Marching In" or tap-danced in the living room or recited a piece of epic prose about the underground railroad on which "our people" had traversed from oppression and slavery to freedom. Our guests, rather, ate meatballs on paper plates and talked bitterly about their ex-husbands.

I also liked the fact that, on *The Cosby Show*, there was never any serious conflict. When Theo graduated from

college, for example, the conflict simply involved the family only having ten tickets to the graduation ceremony. Bill wanted to invite the whole neighborhood. All the ladies kept looking at him and shaking their heads, because Bill Cosby's love for his family was always causing him to make a mess of things. They would shake their heads and laugh, and he would make a funny face, and Theo would throw his hands up, look at the ceiling, and roll his eyes while exclaiming *Gosh*, *Dad!* . . . and I would roll over backward on the floor and look up at the ceiling, sigh, and say under my breath, *Black people have it perfect*.

White people had interesting fathers, too, but nothing to make a sitcom about. When I was growing up my friend Tom had a father, and I learned from this that a real father doesn't have jazz singers over to perform in the living room before dinner, and that real families with fathers don't lip-sync Motown tunes or give speeches at college graduations. Rather, real fathers, at least at Tom's house, clean guns while watching television, weed-eat the lawn with one hand while holding a beer in the other, and squeeze their wife's butt in the kitchen while she is cooking dinner. And because of Tom's father, and because I watched The Cosby Show with the devotion of a Muslim, I came to believe a man was supposed to be around the house to arm and disarm weapons, make sexual advances on the matriarch, perform long and colorful ad-libs with children about why they should clean their room and, above all, always face the

camera, even if the entire family has to sit on one side of the table during dinner.

MY MOTHER WAS the only female father in my Boy Scout troop, and God knows she tried. But the truth is she had no idea what she was doing. We had a pinewood derby car race where you had to carve a car out of a block of wood, then set it on a ramp and race some other guy with a pinewood car. I came in dead last. The night we made the cars my mom dropped me off at the den mother's house and trusted the fathers who were in the garage making their sons' cars to also help make mine. They didn't. I didn't care. I just wanted to drill holes in the cement driveway with a cordless drill. I don't even think my car had wheels when it came time to race, just a lot of WD-40 on the bottom of a block of wood and a stripe down the side like that car in *The Dukes of Hazzard*.

On race night, with a hundred Boy Scouts standing around and two hundred moms and dads standing around with them, my block of wood slid down the ramp at quarter-speed and came to a sudden stop right about the time the ramp gave way to flatness. Everybody got quiet. I just stood there with my hands on my hips, shaking my head saying, That General Lee, always breaking down. My mom was terribly upset about the incident, but I didn't realize it at the

time. We picked up the General Lee and left early, right after my mother had sharp words for the men in our den group, who spoke sharply back to her about a driveway full of drill holes.

Mom kept trying. She asked our landlord's son, who was a pothead, if he would take me to the Boy Scout fatherand-son campout. His name was Matt, and he drove a red Volkswagen bug and listened to Lynyrd Skynyrd tapes and ended every sentence with the phrase, "Do you know what I mean, dude?" He was pretty cool, but I think he felt out of place around the other fathers, men who were approximately twenty years older than he was, and drove trucks or minivans, and were married, and rarely, if ever, smoked pot, or for that matter, listened to Lynyrd Skynyrd.

I think both of us felt out of place at the father-andson campout. After all, we had only met once before, when Matt had come over to the house to change the lightbulbs on the front and back porch.

"Hey, little man," he said to me, looking down from his ladder, "how can I put a bulb in this thing when there's already a bulb in it? Do you know what I mean, dude?"

On the last night of the campout, we were sitting around a fire and the fathers were telling about their favorite memory with their sons, and when it came time for Matt to talk about me he sat silent for a minute. As I said, Matt and I had spent little time together before the campout. I was searching my mind for any kind of memory, and considered

talking about that great time he changed the lightbulbs, how he had to move the ladder a couple times, and how I helped him by turning the switch on and off. I knew it was a boring story, but I thought I might embellish it a bit by insisting both of us got electrocuted and had to give each other CPR. But then Matt broke the silence. Having searched for any kind of memory himself, he told about the car ride on the way to the campout: how we stopped at McDonalds and had to jumpstart the bug, and how we played air guitar and bashed our heads against the dashboard to the tune of "Sweet Home Alabama."

"Times with our sons, or with our neighbors' kids are important, do you know what I mean, dude?" Matt said to the fathers, most of them looking very confused. I nodded my head.

"I know what you mean," I said, breaking the awkward silence.

"Sure you do, Doug," he chortled, rubbing my head.

"Don," I corrected. "My name is Don."

"Sure it is, little man," he said to me with a confused look on his face.

Then Matt, realizing his story had fallen flat, started telling us how he made out with a cheerleader in the janitor's closet when he was in high school. Another father stopped him just short of second base. A prepubescent, collective grunt went out when the story was interrupted, but Matt finished it the next day when we were waiting in line to get

in a canoe. The smell of ammonia, apparently, still turned him on.

MATT WAS GREAT, but not much of a guide in the fathersense. And he went off to the army shortly after the campout, so I never learned important things he knew like how to actually *get* the girl to go *into* the janitor's closet or how to drive for two years without a license.

The next guy was more fatherly but straight as an arrow, which was nice for a change, but he was also nuts. His name was Mr. Kilpin and he went to our church. His thing was to fly remote-control airplanes in a field. It was exciting at first, for about twenty minutes or so, but he would never let me control the plane. He would stand there wearing some sort of military hat he must have picked up in Vietnam, and his eyes would get big as planets as he made the plane dip down and sweep across the field, all the while making bombing noises with his mouth.

"Did you see that, Donald?" he'd ask. "You got those commie bastards," I'd say, sort of looking around for a Frisbee or something. I kept asking, every two minutes, if he would let me fly the plane, but each time he would say maybe next time, maybe just for a few seconds the next time we went out. I had to endure three weekends of simulated bombing runs over the Mekong Delta before he finally gave in to my

pestering and let me take the sticks. Within eight seconds I had flown the thing into a tree, at which point Mr. Kilpin shrieked and ran across the field, shouting, "We've got men down, we've got men on the ground!"

All the way home he lectured me about the kinds of torture a captured pilot has to endure, and we never spent any time together after that.

THE NEXT GUY was an enormous improvement, and proved to be just what I needed as a makeshift father figure. He was the youth minister at my church and was hired about the time I started junior high. His name was David Gentiles, and because most last names are derived from what our ancestors did for a living, I assumed David had come from a small community that politely wanted to differentiate themselves from Jews. David could never authenticate my suspicion, but I told him this was probably the case. I lived about three blocks from the church, so I would go over and visit David in his office. I sat across from him, talking about the state of affairs in the world, football, the weather, girls, all the while going through his desk looking for rubber bands I could shoot at him while he tried to study the Bible. I'd find pencils I could fling into the ceiling tiles, or explain, at length, the many ways he could rearrange his office. David never asked me to leave, and looking back I have no idea why. Either he enjoyed being around me, or he was a good actor. Regardless, he liked my ideas and would nod in agreement when I told him he didn't need a desk, that Ronald Reagan worked standing up, and this would free space in his office for a small putting green and a contraption that shoots the golf ball back to you.

I used to sit and look at the books on David's shelf, asking intelligent and probing questions about each one.

What's that book about the Civil War about? I'd say.

The Civil War, he'd answer.

What about that one about Abraham Lincoln?

That one's just a cookbook, he'd tell me.

After I inquired about twenty or so of his books, he asked if I was interested in books. I told him I didn't know anything about them, that the problem with most books is they were too long. Then he turned me on to some poetry, which was good because it was shorter. David said girls just loved the stuff. I went home and read through a lot of it and memorized a couple, and he seemed pretty impressed with that. He asked me, a little later, if I had ever thought about writing. He told me he thought I had a knack for understanding poetry and wondered if I would be interested in writing a guest editorial for the youth group newsletter.

"I've seen a lot of growth in you, Don," he said while we were walking down the church hallway. "You've really got a way with words, and your spiritual life has developed uniquely, quite beautifully, and I feel like you could deal with spirituality in a delicate manner, getting to the heart of our faith. Would you be interested in writing an article?"

"Does the Pope crap in the woods?" I told him.

I spent the next week poring over the dictionary for the biggest, most obscure words I could find—words like loquacious and flabbergasted. I was going to knock Dave's socks off with my smarts. The first sentence of my article read:

"The loquaciousness of pious rhetoric has developed into a pariah in the corridors of First Baptist Church."

The article was about how everybody was stupid except for me and Dave, and went on to name the top ten most boring people at First Baptist Church.

I turned the article in to David and he sat behind his desk and kind of hummed and coughed as he read, his eyes getting big and his hands flattening the paper and his head suddenly jolting back when he came to the end of a paragraph. He put his hand on his forehead and looked at me in bewilderment, probably wondering how such brilliant writing could come at such a young age. "Good use of exclamation points," he finally said. "Your punctuation is remarkable."

And looking back, I believe it was. I've always been good at punctuation!

David kindly explained, however, the article might be a bit critical, and I might consider writing about something I like—people I like, perhaps—or do a review of a movie or a record, or maybe write up a concert or something going

on at school. I told him those were all good ideas, but as a journalist, I would need to make up my own mind about what I would write and that, as much as I respected him, I wasn't going to be a pawn of The Man.

"Would never ask you to compromise," David said.

"Thanks," I told him, leaning back in my chair and crossing my legs. "I am not a fan of corporate."

"Me neither," he said with a confused look on his face.

There happened to be a talent show going on at school that week, and I decided I would interview some of the talent and write a review. I sat in the back with a notebook on my lap, hoping people would ask why I had that notebook on my lap, or for that matter a pencil behind each ear, or for that matter a hat with an index card on which was printed the word PRESS. I roamed during the show, walking the aisles, trying to get a feel for audience reaction. Then I went backstage as a band called Dead Man Sweat did a partially intelligible, twelve-minute rendition of "Pour Some Sugar on Me," toward the end of which the lead singer opened a bag of sugar and poured it over his long, dark hair, causing the principal to put an end to the music. The lead singer had to sweep up the mess before three girls came out and did a dance from the movie Flashdance. The girls danced sultrily against and on top of chairs as some guys from the football team squirted water on them from the wings. This was also, unfortunately, interrupted. But I interviewed them all. I interviewed the rock band, asking, "Sugar is a metaphor for what?" Earlier that week, I had learned what a metaphor was, and the concept fascinated me. "Leg warmers are a metaphor for what?" I asked the girls who did the *Flashdance*.

Then this girl came up, this girl from my youth group, whom I had mostly ignored that year, and she stepped to the microphone and shyly said, "Hello," and that she would like to sing a Christian song for Jesus. I dropped my pencil. It's social suicide, I thought. You can't sing a song for Jesus at a high school talent show. The audience threw out some cold remarks about going back to Mayberry, and when the piano accompaniment started, she belted out quite possibly the worst rendition of "His Eye Is on the Sparrow" ever performed, save Roger Bobo's tuba rendition with the Canadian Brass.

The crowd had a field day. It was like *The Gong Show*. People were rolling in the aisles. And standing backstage I started feeling a little sorry for her, and then something strange happened in my chest. What I mean is, there is this fight or flight thing that happens when you decide whether you were going to associate with—or disassociate yourself from—somebody who has fallen down or coughed up their food, whether you were going to say you never knew her, didn't attend the same church, didn't worship the same God, or whether you were going to, well, clap. And I clapped. I mean when she finished, I clapped, and I meant it. It felt good to take a stand for somebody who nobody else was taking a stand for. And she came off the stage and I asked

her what the sparrow was a metaphor for, and then I told her I thought she did a great job, that I was proud of her. She looked at me with this huge smile and you could tell she was very nervous and relieved at the same time. And I went home that night and wrote an article saying I thought God might have been kind of happy with the talent show, and I wrote about how I thought we should all be willing to make complete idiots of ourselves for God, and how even if our voices sound like *a chicken in a cage with a ferret*, we should be willing to praise God with the pipes God gave us. The tag line at the end of the article, the real clincher, the tearjerker exclamation point was this:

And even though everybody in the auditorium was booing that night, and even though Monica shouldn't be allowed to sing the national anthem at a chess tournament, the angels in heaven were clapping, and the opinions of angels matter more than the opinions of people, because angels can fly.

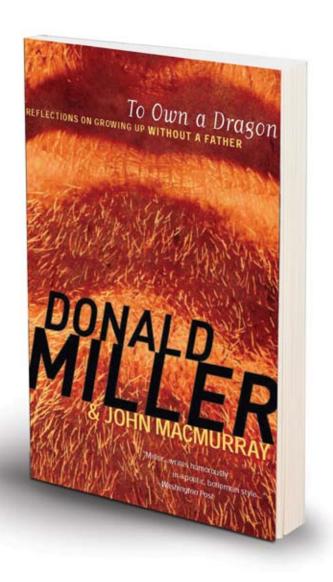
I gave the article to Monica first, and I stood there while she read it, and about halfway through her eyes started to water, and about three-fourths through she put her hand over her mouth, and when she finished she looked me in the eye with the tenderest, most vulnerable look, dropped the piece of paper, and ran down the hall of the math wing. I knew then that I had the gift—that David Gentiles was right, that I could move people with words, encourage them and change their lives forever. And even though Dave thought it best I rewrite the article and take out several of the harsher adjectives and the bit about the *chicken in a cage with a ferret*, the thing still had power. I got a lot of calls from people at the church, and people stopped me in the halls to say *good job*, and *that line about angels having wings was an interesting point*.

I only tell you this to say David Gentiles, who could have done just about anything else with his time, decided to spend time with me and give me a shot at writing. He was somebody who stepped into my life and helped me believe I was here on purpose, and for a purpose. I don't think there are very many things more important than this when we are kids.

The truth I've learned about life is you can't do it on your own. People don't do well independently. One generation passes wisdom to the next, wisdom about girls and faith and punctuation. And we won't be as good a person if we don't receive it.

And in life, I figure, you are going to pretty much do the things that make you feel good about yourself, make you feel important and on purpose, and walk away from the things that make you feel like a loser. I distinctly remember this phase in my life, this time when I started writing, as a kind of fork in the road. On one hand, a good friend and I had just discovered a quick and easy way to break into

houses, stealing loose change from jars on people's dressers. And then there was this church thing going on, and it wasn't like I was deciding which person I was going to become; it's more like I was swimming in a river and there were two equal currents. I could have very easily ended up in prison—first breaking into houses, then falling in with the wrong crowd, then drugs, and so on and so on. A statistic. David Gentiles was the person who threw out a rope. He was a father figure. People assume when you're swimming in a river you are supposed to know which way you are going, and I guess some of the time that is true, but there are certain currents that are very strong, and it's when we are in those currents we need somebody to come along, pull us out, and guide us in a safer direction.



TO OWN A DRAGON

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