

'Blood Ties' probes familial love, its lack

Blood Ties. By Jennifer Lash. Bloomsbury USA. 384 pages. \$24.95.

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Special to the Journal Sentinel

Debates about the influence of nature and nurture tend to be abstract discussions that are difficult for people to imagine in real terms.

Jennifer Lash has drawn a very clear picture in "Blood Ties" of the role of nurturing and how its absence can create wrecked lives that then spin out in the world to wreck more lives. She illustrates with unexpected insight what should be obvious — that when children aren't treated so well, they don't usually turn out to be very nice.

Along the way, Lash is able to convincingly chronicle the interior world of frightened children and emotionally stunted adults. The path from a shaken baby to a sullen teenager, for example, is traced with credible drama in the imagined consciousness of that child.

Set on an Irish country estate, "Blood Ties" begins with two shallow and inconsiderate people neglecting the upbringing of their son, Lumsden.

Cecil is too simple and timid to have comfortable relations

with anybody, and Violet is too devoted to the principle of an orderly home to truly appreciate children.

The infant Lumsden is a terrible imposition on that order, and Violet treats him as such. Without her unconditional love, Lumsden starts life haunted by an uncertainty of who he is and how to relate to others.



Lash

In American terms, he "acts out" in search of attention, and Violet responds with increasing impatience. This sets off a speeding seesaw of indif-

ferences and cruelties toward each other that eventually result in an adult Lumsden banished from Ireland, equipped with no impulse but to be so bad that he is at least noticeable to others.

During the hedonistic course of the rest of his life, he runs roughshod over the spirit of a young London woman eager for life ahead. Her disappointment with the hand she is dealt in Lumsden leads her to similarly

neglect and abuse their son, Spencer.

They fail so badly as parents that Spencer is returned to Ireland nearly comatose from the deprivation of familial love. Violet confuses her unwanted grandson's cautious silence with the hostility between her and her son. Her parenting skills haven't improved much, and Spencer is eventually returned an emotional wreck to a series of foster homes in London. There, as a young man falling love, he finally begins to heal.

At this point, tragedy strikes, but paradoxically "Blood Ties" gets a lot more pleasant to read and think about. The ending is not a tragedy of meaninglessness like Lumsden's dissolute life, but just a run-of-the-mill tragedy that is a part of life. And being a part of life, it is therefore part of something glorious and hopeful.

The truly disastrous and bewildering threat — the emotional bleakness that Spencer was headed for — doesn't come to pass.

The story seems an awfully cynical view of love — familial love especially — but love is redeemed in the end. Along the way, we are offered convincing

insights about how love works: about how blood ties can be everything and still not enough.

In the end, this story is not just about the enormous impact of mundane cruelties echoing down the generations but also about the enormous impact of mundane love — of people who take people as they are and wish the best for them.

"Blood Ties" is a slow and deliberate book loaded with carefully crafted language.

The story's progress isn't about what happens next but about how what has happened will determine how people feel next and what they think next. That story takes more time to tell, and it's a book that requires a reader's thoughtful attention.

But "Blood Ties" is a valuable book, a very graceful and intelligent addition to what is often literature's most intriguing undertaking: imagining what people are and what makes us tick.

"Blood Ties" is the sixth book by Jennifer Lash and her last before her death in 1993, although it is the first published in this country. She is the mother of actor Ralph Fiennes.

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