

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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## Mad men

James FitzGerald uncovers the unspeakable depression that plagued his father and grandfather

Reviewed by Patricia Pearson

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When Toronto journalist James FitzGerald was a boy, his highly accomplished father, the first physician to open an allergy practice in the city at a time when people didn't know what made them itch, arrived home one night from a vacation in Mexico and strode blankly past his excited, waiting children. Dr. FitzGerald, monied and widely respected, ascended the stairs to the second floor of the family home on Balmoral Avenue and retreated to the master bedroom, affixing a note to the door that said, simply and starkly: "Daddy ded." (Yes, he left out the a.)

If ever a child could be haunted by the beginning of the end of his Captain of the Universe father, it was this child, James FitzGerald, who has grown up to write a memoir of extraordinary power and candour about the shadowy demons that stalk Canada's well-heeled elite.

FitzGerald is known for exposing the dark side of the ruling class due to his profile of a private school in the book *Old Boys: The Powerful Legacy of Upper Canada College*, which sparked an inquiry into sexual abuse leading to the arrests of three teachers and resulted in a class-action lawsuit against the school, which was settled in 2002. (This was the pedagogical nest that hatched Conrad Black, Michael Ignatieff and Ted Rogers, among other old boys, for those readers who aren't aware that Canada was once governed by the residents of approximately three acres of finely tended lawn around St. Clair and Avenue Road.)

Now, with *What Disturbs Our Blood*, a reader understands completely why FitzGerald went after UCC. He is the son and grandson of men who were driven beyond the boundaries of their sanity by the pressure to make those same lawns so finely tended, and those homes so grand, and to enable their spouses and children to shop languidly in Yorkville.

"This book is as riveting as a crime thriller"

FitzGerald's father, Jack, the man who would go on to attempt suicide and spend the rest of his life as a wan, heavily medicated shell, was fundamentally a sensualist when he was growing up, a man who loved women and whisky and music. Nothing, according to James, made his father Jack happier than listening to Peggy Lee and Lena Horne. In his twenties, he even managed to coax Duke Ellington back to the house on Balmoral after concerts for delirious after-parties. Given his druthers, he might have been a music promoter, or perhaps run a jazz club.

But he was not given his druthers. He was a man obliged to succeed in a certain way, as his father had succeeded. He had to go to medical school, because that was the way forward. In Jack's story one finds resounding echoes of every man's story in the postwar period, when providing for your family meant a very particular, intently implied and rigid direction that you had to follow without guarantee that you'd succeed. It wasn't like the medieval guilds, where son of Gerald had a place in the metal-working guild, say, and could do

that, for better or worse, until he died. This was a more anxiety-provoking proposition: Follow in these steps, and if you fail, you're toast.

Jack's fate forms the central suspense of James FitzGerald's book – the son's quest to understand why his father was driven to suicide by his outwardly accomplished life, and how this trail of inquiry leads to the grandfather, the famously successful doctor, Gerry FitzGerald, who worked in tandem with Banting and Best to introduce insulin to the grateful world during the 1920s.

Unbeknownst to James, until he embarked upon his research, his famous grandfather had also collapsed, at the very height of his career, into a suicidal depression. To say more would be to ruin the plot, for this book is as riveting as a crime thriller in the way that FitzGerald actually pieces together what happened and discovers what got covered up by a conspiracy of family and colleagues, for whom the fragility of men was an unspeakable admission.

Suffice it to say that in tracing his family story, FitzGerald also reveals an amazingly multilayered history of the male psyche in the 20th century and the social strivings in Toronto during this time, a fascinating account of psychiatry in early 20th-century North America, and the story of medicine in Toronto during the frenetic and genius work of Banting and Best between the World Wars.

I've heard it said – and I believe it – that every writer has one great story to tell. This is James FitzGerald's story, hence his subtitle: *A Son's Quest To Redeem the Past*. It has been his mission to avoid his father's and grandfather's fate, to consciously avoid what society considers high achievement, to avowedly refuse to sublimate his emotions until they grab him by the ankle and pull him down, to enrich himself with sanity, rather than with grand houses and acclaim.

The mission appears to have been accomplished.

Fitzgerald's title, by the way, refers to a poem by Yeats: "What disturbs our blood is but its longing for the tomb."

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