



Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Our Family Stories Shape Us

Elizabeth Stone

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When someone says, at a holiday dinner table, “Oh, those Lawrence cousins lose control all the time,” or the Davises always had more talent than luck,” you can be sure there’s a lesson being passed along, from one generation to another. Who tells stories to whom and about what is never a random matter.

Our family stories have a secret power: they play a unique role in shaping our identity and our sense of our place in the world. They give us values, inspirations, warnings, and incentives. We need them. We use them. We keep them. They reverberate throughout our lives, affecting our choices in love, work, friendship, and lifestyle.

Elizabeth Stone, whose grandparents came from Italy to Brooklyn, artfully weaves her own family stories among the stories of more than a hundred people of all backgrounds, ages, and regions—clarifying for us predictable types of family legends, providing ways to interpret our own stories and their roles in our lives. She examines stories of birth, death, work, money, and romantic adventure—all in the context of the family storytelling ritual. And she shows how stories about our most ancient ancestors may provide answers at milestone moments in our lives, as well as how stories about our newest family members carve out places for them so that they will fit into their families, comfortably or otherwise.

Upon its initial publication in 1988, Studs Terkel said that the book is “A wholly original approach to an ancient theme: family storytelling and its lasting mark on the individual.” Judy Collins noted that “Elizabeth Stone’s marvelous book on family myths and fables is irresistible. It lets us in on our own secrets in a provocative and exciting way.” And Maggie Scarf wrote, “What a clever topic, and how beautifully Elizabeth Stone has written about it! I recommend *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins* for everyone who has ever been raised in a family.”

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