The Perfect Family

Kathryn Shay
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The cruelest part of leaving the closet is watching family members retreat into the newly vacated space. In gay literature this aspect of coming out is often sidelined. A person comes out and the narrative focuses on that person and his or her relationships. Missing are the shockwaves as felt by other members of the family and community. While even paragons of the genre like Terrence McNally and Edmund White are guilty of this omission, Kathryn Shay's latest book, *The Perfect Family*, explores this unsettling territory.

The Perfect Family follows four members of a happy, middle-class suburban family. Well-educated parents Mike and Maggie Davidson and their high school-aged sons–Brian, the elder and a star athlete, and Jamie, the lead in the school play–form the modern version of television's Cleaver family. When Maggie's estranged sister attempts a reunion and Jamie comes out of the closet, everybody must reexamine their relationship to one another, their faith, and their community if the family is to survive.

Cracks appear, and Shay uses each to transform her characters into real people. Mike finds himself unable to reconcile his son's revelation with his conservative interpretation of Catholic dogma. After being the last to learn of Jamie's news, Brian wonders if his close friendship with his sibling is an illusion. And Maggie, while trying to help her sister, worries about her son's happiness as she becomes aware of the subtle and blatant homophobia within their idyllic community.

Shay then takes *The Perfect Family* a step further. With incredible empathy she details how Jamie's coming out effects his parents' relationship. By using the son's homosexuality as an invitation to explore the larger question of how families handle change, Shay show characters evolving in a realistic way.

With thirty-five novels, two novellas, and multiple publishing awards, Shay is a well-established author in the romance genre. Occasionally, her background seeps into *The Perfect Family*, usually in Mike and Maggie's bedroom: "Makeup sex. His hands brushing down her hair. Cupping her breasts. Sliding to her thigh with urgency. She'd been on the other side of the jealousy issue, so she knew what he was feeling."

Such sexual content, despite never becoming gratuitous, may make it difficult for a teen to share the book with his family. But readers will relish the complexities and the empathic tone driving this story.

JOSEPH THOMPSON (May / June 2011)

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