

OFF THE VANIER BOOKSHELF

NATHAN BATTAMS

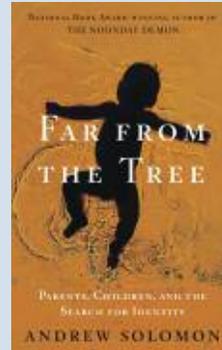
In his newest book, *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity*, Andrew Solomon explores how the relationship between parents and their children is shaped by difference. This book is a study of identity among people who have “anomalous children” – those who present unexpected parenting experiences, including the deaf, dwarfs, transgender children, prodigies, criminals and rape-conceived children, as well as those living with disabilities, Down syndrome, autism and schizophrenia. Solomon shows how the identities and perceptions of parents in these families are transformed as a result of the stark difference between them and their children, some of whom end up “grateful for experiences they would have done anything to avoid.” He combines their stories, his own memories as a gay and dyslexic child, and family research to explore how difference and diversity can unite people.

Parenthood, Solomon argues, is a “permanent relationship with a stranger” – a reminder that children are unique individuals who often differ from us in unexpected and sometimes challenging ways. Our relationship to them is shaped by the “vertical” and “horizontal” identities they display. Vertical identities are collections of traits that children have *in common* with their parents, which can be biological (e.g. skin pigmentation) or cultural (e.g. ethnicity or language). Horizontal identities, on the other hand, are inherent or acquired traits that *differ* from their parents, which can also be biological (resulting from recessive genes or random mutations) or cultural (e.g. values and preferences that differ from those of one or both parents). This book is about children with horizontal conditions, and Solomon deliberately focuses on examples of acute difference to better understand how the “universal phenomenon of difference” shapes families.

Much of the content in *Far from the Tree* is derived from interviews Solomon conducted with more than 300 families that feature some kind of pronounced horizontal identity. He bases much of the discussion in his book on anecdotes instead of statistics because, as he puts it, “Numbers imply trends, while stories acknowledge chaos”; the complexity of relationships between family members, and between these families

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Andrew Solomon. New York, NY: Scribner, 2012.



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and society, can be all too easily lost in the inherently distanced nature of statistics. Each chapter contains affirming stories of relationships between severely challenging children and their parents, revealing how their often difficult journey has enriched their lives and made them more resilient in all aspects of life. For many, difficulty provided an opportunity for growth.

The stories in *Far from the Tree* force us to expand our understanding of family relationships. The kinship experiences described in Solomon’s book will likely seem extreme to many readers, their trajectories so diverse and intense that, at times, there seem to be few points of convergence. Underlying the stories, however, is a common experience: difference and difficulty. Love in these families does not just thrive *despite* the enormous challenges they face – it often thrives *because* of them. As Solomon says, “Love is enriched by difficulty; love is made more acute when it requires exertion.” Indeed, this holds true in many families, regardless of their unique experiences. This book describes the power of generosity, acceptance and tolerance emerging from relationships that have been enriched by difficulty and diversity. *Far from the Tree* is recommended reading for educators, researchers, students, family service professionals and any families living with difference. ◀

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To order: <http://www.farfromthetree.com>