

# Revealing the soft psyche of high-WASP culture

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THE INTERVIEW

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For someone whose past was like a bully, taunting him and undercutting his self-confidence, James FitzGerald seems strangely enamoured of it.

From every corner, the past beckons. It's in the faded wood, the stained-glass windows, the graceful proportions of the century-old house in the west end of Toronto, where his office occupies the ground floor. It winks from old photographs: his graduation picture from Upper Canada College; formal portraits of him and his younger brother and sister, taken in the fifties; grainy black-and-white images of maternal and paternal ancestors. It speaks from a framed document about his Irish ancestors who arrived in Port Hope, Ont., in 1824.

And even though Mr. FitzGerald, 59, has paid

it a lifetime of attention and given it centre stage in his beautifully written new memoir, *What Disturbs Our Blood: A Son's Quest to Redeem the Past*, the past continues to dance through his head. They are both, still, in each other's tight embrace.

The story of his family's brilliant but troubled history "was fermenting for a long time," Mr. FitzGerald begins slowly, settling his imposing 6-foot-4-inch frame into a thinking-man's chair. "My self-realization has come through books," he says. The memoir, 15 years in the making, is related thematically to his first book, *Old Boys: The Powerful Legacy of Upper Canada College*, an oral history of the storied elite boy's school, published in 1994. Mr. FitzGerald was the third generation in his family to attend the school and learn what he considers a strict, reductive expectation for male behaviour.

He speaks of his family with a writer's love of detail - the psychology of the characters and the surprising way themes repeat and overlap. There was his father, Jack, a remote, neglectful father and renowned allergist who attempted suicide as he fell into a midlife, depressive spiral. And there was his grandfather, Gerald, also a noted medical pioneer whose work in the 1920s in collaboration with Banting and Best brought the world insulin. He, too, fell into suicidal despair at the height of his career.

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James FitzGerald spent 15 years working on his memoir.

SARAH DEA/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

# He needed to tell the story, if only to save himself

» His tragic end by his own hand is the central mystery of the book, which Mr. FitzGerald had to uncover, as no one in the family would speak of it.

Stiff-upper-lip silence versus investigative revelation, being a traitor to his class – these are all part of what drives Mr. FitzGerald. “Yes, yes,” he nods when asked if he set out to reveal the inner workings of high-WASP culture. “My friend called me the Salman Rushdie of Forest Hill,” he says, referring to the monied Toronto enclave.

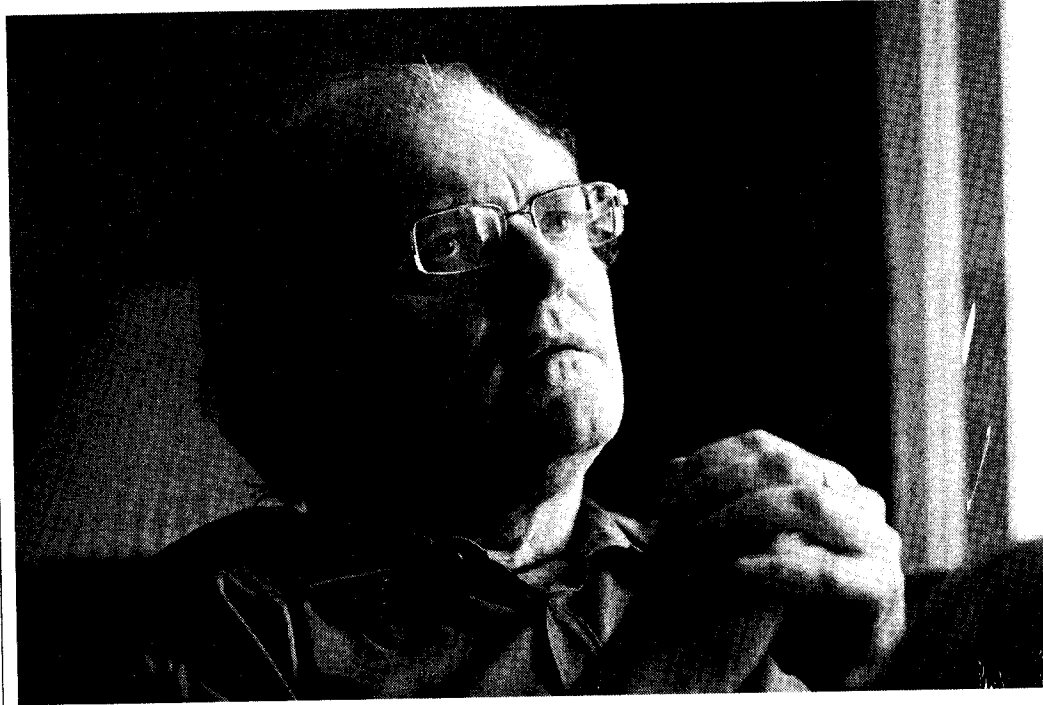
His father, who knew of his son’s interest in the family’s Gothic past, sarcastically referred to him as “Mr. Know-It-All.” He was “my worst interview,” the son adds. He died, a shell of his former self, in 1992. His mother helped him with his research, but she too dismissed his achievements as a writer. “She harrumphed behind her oxygen mask,” he says, describing the deathbed scene in 2006, when he told her he had submitted the first draft of the memoir.

He had begun the book in earnest in 1995, the year after he published *Old Boys*, which exposed the dark side of UCC and helped lead to the inquiry into sexual abuse and subsequent arrests. “The school was a crucible of father-son

dynamics,” he explains. *What Disturbs The Blood* is a deeper “exploration of masculinity” he says.

It had taken him a long time to find the courage and the confidence to tell the story of the gifts and disturbances that defined his powerful ancestors. But in the end, he realized he needed to, if only to save himself. In his youth, he acted as though he would be unaffected by the legacy of his father’s breakdown. “I never thought, ‘I’m programmed to repeat this. I got on with my life.’” But in his thirties, after the end of a two-year relationship, he was spinning his wheels. “I had a fear of success, I think,” he says soberly. “In my family, if you become successful, you end up crazy or dead,” he concludes with a big, loose laugh.

The book – the act of painstakingly researching the medical history, of fixing words to the page – has helped heal him. “If I hadn’t ... done this book, I think I would have drunk myself to oblivion or had an accident,” he says, putting air quotes around the last word to indicate the possibility of suicide. “Or maybe I would have faded into a lethargic stupor.” He lifts his eyebrows and stretches his long legs in front of him. “It has been a



James FitzGerald at his home in Toronto. He learned to be his own therapist. SARAH DEA/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

**In my family, if you become successful, you end up crazy or dead.**

validation of my own personality.” “It’s a terrible word, closure,” continues Mr. FitzGerald. “You never fully resolve these conflicts, you learn to deal with them.” When he tracked down an old colleague of his grandfather’s to learn the gruesome way he killed himself, he felt relief, he says. “I had been dreaming and intuiting something that was being with-

held.” The book includes some astonishing entries in a dream journal Mr. FitzGerald kept. Learning the truth made him feel as though he wasn’t crazy himself. He could also finally come to terms with the complexity of his childhood. There was joy and happiness, alongside the pain. “I can now appreciate it in its entirety,” he says. His two siblings have been sup-

portive of the work. The telling of the story, he says, has helped them too. The extended family is pleased to highlight the medical careers of the FitzGerald doctors. “When I discovered the scope of the work, I thought, ‘Wow, to think suicide could wipe out that incredible, international achievement.’” Mr. FitzGerald unpacks his thoughts carefully, as if they were precious cargo. “I made the choice to confront the past ... I am a transformed person,” he says. And he realizes the irony that he has become a kind of a doctor in his own way. “I am a pathologist palpitating the body politic.”

He palpitates himself, too. Years ago he found a therapist who helped him confront his issues, but he has also learned to be his own shrink. “If I could write a thought bubble above the head of that three-year-old self [that appears on the book’s cover], it would be ‘Why aren’t you picking me up?’” he says, referring to his mother, who took the picture and was as remote a parent as her husband. “And now I have written a book that many have said is unput-downable.”

Mr. FitzGerald raises his eyebrows again, intrigued by the twisted themes of his life. “Interesting, isn’t it?” he asks.