

The secrets that lie within us

Toronto author James FitzGerald, Arts'72, doesn't believe the adage that "What you don't know can't hurt you."

The author of the critically acclaimed new book *What Disturbs Our Blood* learned early on that what you don't know can hurt and can be self-defining. In his own case, it was a family secret about mental illness that threatened to destroy him.

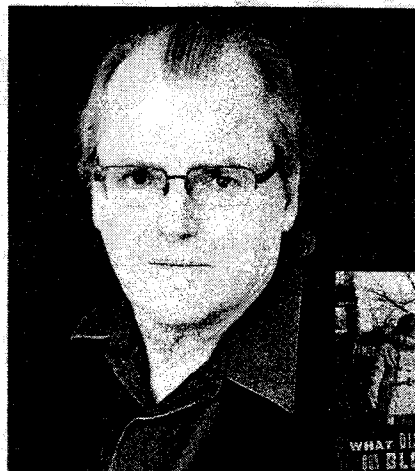
James is the scion of one of Toronto's most prominent medical families. His father, Jack, was a high-profile physician who opened Toronto's first allergy clinic. FitzGerald's grandfather, Gerry, founded two of Canada's best-known public health institutions – the School of Hygiene at the U of T and Connaught Laboratories – and worked alongside Frederick Banting and Charles Best as they discovered insulin.

The FitzGeralds lived what seemed to be the charmed life of Toronto's WASP elite. Young James and his brother and sister wanted for nothing, at least materially. Yet there was trouble in paradise. The author, now 60, told the *Review*, "I slowly became as attuned to what my family wasn't talking about as to what they were."

The truth was that both Gerry and Jack FitzGerald were deeply troubled men. The demon of depression lived within them, a reality that James alludes to in the title of his book, which comes from a line in William Butler Yeats's poem *The Wheel* ("...what disturbs our blood/ Is but its longing for the tomb.")

James was painfully aware that Jack FitzGerald had suffered a nervous breakdown in 1966, botched two suicide attempts, and lived out his life sedated and under psychiatric care, before dying in 1992.

Meanwhile, the son had his own



Author James FitzGerald

successful multi-million-dollar class action law suit against UCC.

Next, James began delving into his own troubled life. He explains that people were always asking him why he hadn't "made more" of himself. He had puzzled over the same thing, wondering why it was that he seemed to "cultivate mediocrity." Yet his gut instinct told him there was a reason, one even he didn't understand. It was only when he researched his own genealogy that he came to understand what it was: Mental illness ran in the family.

James uncovered the secret his stiff-upper-lip parents had never shared with him or his siblings:

Gerry FitzGerald had killed himself in 1940.

Determined to avoid the same dark fate that had befallen both his father and grandfather (and a paternal great-uncle), James not only confronted his personal demons, he wrote about them. His journey of self-discovery took 15 long years to complete, but he now says all of the effort was worth it. The fruit of his labours is a remarkable book that has won critical plaudits – reviewer Steve Noyes of *The National Post* has hailed it as "a fascinating, multi-layered history of 20th-century medicine and a passionate inquiry into a family's tragedies" – and the book has been shortlisted for the 2010 Writers Trust Non-Fiction Award, which carries with it a \$25,000 cash prize.

However, whether he wins or loses that contest, James FitzGerald feels he has already won. As he recently told a *Globe and Mail* reporter, "If I hadn't ... done this book, I think I'd have drunk myself to oblivion or had 'an accident.' Or maybe I'd have faded into a lethargic stupor." - K.C.

demons to wrestle with. He bombed out in first year at Queen's. When he was allowed to return for a second year, a Film Studies course taught by Prof. Peter Harcourt changed his life, opening his eyes to his own creative potential. James completed a three-year BA, did a one-year graduate program in Journalism at Western, and then worked as a reporter for 19 years. However, like his mother before him, he was a frustrated artist.

When James became a freelance writer in 1992 he began writing about what really mattered to him. One such topic was the dirty secrets of life behind the closed doors at Upper Canada College (UCC), which he had attended in his youth, as had his father before him. James's explosive 1994 book, *Old Boys: The Powerful Legacy of Upper Canada College*, prompted some former students to come forward with allegations of sexual abuse suffered at the school. This, in turn, led to the criminal convictions of some former teachers and prompted a suc-

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