

# GETTING TO KNOW THEM

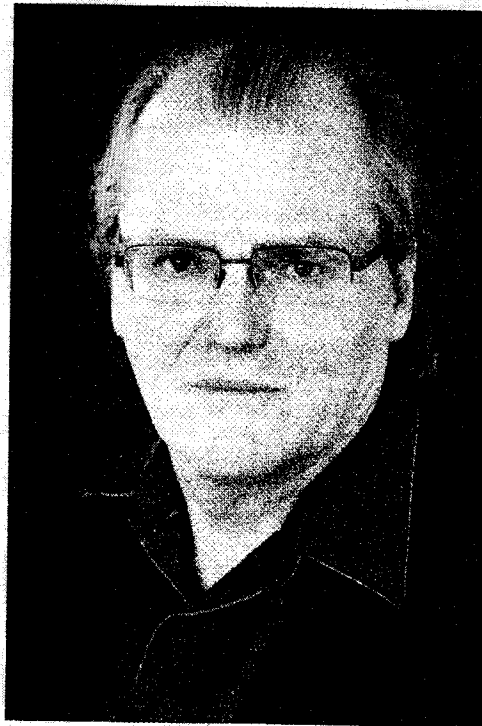
Writing about institutional cover-ups and family secrets taught James FitzGerald the disturbing power of the truth

**M**ost families are riddled with secrets, but I suspect mine was more riddled than most. During the Second World War, my mother worked as a clandestine decoding clerk, helping the MI5 spymaster Sir William Stevenson track Nazi agents. Sworn to silence, 20 years passed before she was allowed to reveal her glamorous past to her family. Sometimes she would tantalize my youthful curiosity about other family lore – “Oh, there are things you will *never* know!” – then dangle clues like worms, keeping me wriggling on the hook. Some believe all writers write for their mothers.

Or is it their fathers? As a teenager in the 1960s, I watched my father, a driven medical specialist at the peak of his professional success, descend into suicidal depression. My father never spoke about his own father, who had died a decade before my birth. I had no idea that my grandfather, a world-class bacteriologist and germ-busting professor of hygiene, had wiped out diphtheria and mass produced Banting and Best’s insulin for the world’s diabetics – just two of his many international achievements in public health.

As a young man, I sensed that something unspeakable had eradicated my grandfather’s reputation, just as he had eradicated infectious diseases, yet my immaturity, combined with a vague trepidation, prevented me from delving deeper. I wasn’t ready.

Like my father, much of my sensibility was formed at the Toronto all-boys private school Upper Canada College, yet we never spoke of our shared experience. At UCC, I was introduced to the phenomenon of the “open secret,” wherein bizarre and even illegal acts would routinely unfold for all to see, without anyone acknowledging the elephant in the room. My later stint in journalism school coincided with the Watergate scandal, that archetypal conspiracy of silence and cold-blooded cover-ups. I became intrigued by the psychology of everyday personal secrets – how deep experiences of pain, loss, and grief spiral down the basement steps of repression and out-and-out



forgetting. As Dr. Freud suggested, we keep secrets even from ourselves.

When I first saw *Citizen Kane*, something stirred inside me. The final close-up of a child’s sled burning in a furnace drove home a truth I realized I had been busy denying: more than one Rosebud hung from the branches of my own family tree. This, together with my father’s Sphinx-like silence, inspired my first book.

For *Old Boys*, my 1994 oral history of UCC, I interviewed dozens of former students. Though my father wouldn’t talk to me – he went to his grave as my worst interview – others did. In ways I never anticipated, the revelations in the book catalyzed the exposure of even more “dirt” over the ensuing decade: three former teachers were eventually convicted of sexual misdemeanours, and their victims launched a class action suit against the school. The key lessons I learned? If you shut up and listen, people will talk. Also, gossip typically understates the facts – we don’t know the half of it.

By middle age, I was finally ready for a book on family, the womb of our deepest

secrets. My quest to crack the mystery enshrouding my grandfather propelled me down the river of my paternal bloodline toward our ancestral Irish village. Across the generations came tales of brilliance and melancholy, fierce work ethics and addictions, black holes of silence. One night, I dreamt of a doctor lifting a scalpel and making a vertical incision down the middle of my face, releasing a torrent of water. It proved a prescient image, for I soon learned that, early in his career, my grandfather cut open the brains of Irish lunatics at Toronto’s infamous 999 Queen Street West asylum, seeking the elusive germ of madness.

Then from an archive came the breakthrough: a cache of confessional letters written by my grandfather in 1940 in the last months of his life. Why did he obsessively repeat the phrase: “I have committed the unpardonable sin – and the penalty is death”? By the slimmest of chances – if it *was* chance – I tracked down an aged doctor, one of the few still living who knew my grandfather; his revelation was both shocking and liberating. At last, I understood my father’s silence; at last I was able to compose *What Disturbs Our Blood*, a book about my family’s secrets, a book whose central mystery I will not reveal here.

“You can’t find the soul with a scalpel,” Flaubert advised, and I remain forever awed by the healing power inherent in the acts of listening, speaking, and writing. Fifteen years of labour, immunizing myself with incremental doses of historical truth, taught me the virtue of being patient, if only to forestall *becoming* a patient. Even so, the “truth” refuses to be reduced to a child’s burning sled – there’s no such thing as a final close-up, only a glimpse into the bottomless mystery. If a truth sets us free, it is only because we let ourselves be disturbed by it.

JAMES FITZGERALD is the author of *Old Boys: The Powerful Legacy of Upper Canada College* (Macfarlane Walter & Ross) and *What Disturbs Our Blood: A Son’s Quest to Redeem the Past* (Random House Canada). He lives in Toronto.