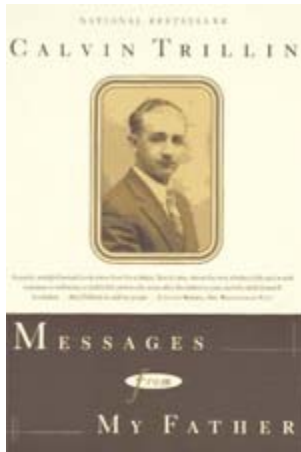


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2006 selection

Messages from My Father by Calvin Trillin

Reading Guide prepared by
Kathleen Butterly Nigro, Ph.D.

We learn a lot about the Trillin ancestors and family through just a few brief anecdotes and nicknames. How is this typical of family stories, and how is Trillin particularly successful at it (5-9)*?

Would you consider this habit typical of your family?

What are some of Abe Trillin's stock sayings that give us a fuller image of him?

("I don't care what you say" (5; 94); "You might as well be a mensch"; "big *k'nocker*" (25; 52). "lose less" (17; 115); "We do not hit girls" (63); "O. and F." (65); "real go-getter" (68); "*very ordinary*" (74); "What's the advantage?" (84).

Trillin writes that his father "raised me not to be him," but observing his father (or example, when he "had to let someone go") made a big impression on the son. Since his father never discussed business or financial matters with the author, how did he have such a profound impression on him (18-20)?

The visit to the camera store is the memory that the author of the moment when he realized that his father "did not impress the world at large as a powerful figure." Unlike a character in "novels of American strivers," Trillin was not disillusioned by this experience. How does he explain his unchanging attitude toward his parent (23; 34)?

The yellow necktie was a trademark of Abe Trillin. As a matter of fact, when he died, people who had known him asked to have one of his ties "to remember him by" (111). Why do you think it was important to him to wear yellow ties? Did his insistence—perhaps "stubbornness"—make a point at which he was successful (26; 112-113)?

*Page numbers for citations from *Messages from My Father*.

“He talked instantly and naturally to every child he ever met,” the author writes of his father. What does that observation reveal about Abe Trillin? Consider the anecdote of “yifnif” (38).

The author writes that it occurs to him that “upbringings have themes” (47). What was the theme of Trillin’s life? How is this typical of many American children? How did it affect the lives of Trillin’s daughters (114-115)? How might the lives of children of immigrants be shaped differently from those of native parents? (Consider the variations on the American theme, page 48.)

Why was it so important to Abe Trillin that his son go to Yale (55-57; 75 and 78 have references to the University of Missouri)? Why was it not as important for his sister Sukey (33)? Was it an extension of Abe Trillin’s own dreams? [Consider the comment “Passengers on the magic escalator” on page 80.]

Trillin writes that “Some of the messages I’ve tried to get across to my children may still be in code” (115). In what ways is this book a deciphering of Abe Trillin’s “code” to his son?

The author considers his interest in writing about his father to have crystallized when he was writing the memoir of his college friend, Denny (“Roger”) Hansen, *Remembering Denny*. Even if you have not read this memoir, consider the following: Hansen was a Rhodes scholar, Phi Beta Kappa, and destined, according to his Yale classmates, to be president of the United States. He was so symbolic of his era that he was photographed as the quintessential Yale student for a 1957 *Life* magazine article. However, his life did not turn out as it had promised, and at age 55, Hansen committed suicide. Why is this an important story to be included in this book (remember that Abe Trillin was very impressed with Denny [73])? [Trillin writes in the *Salon* interview, “The mail I got from “Denny” was very similar to the mail I got when the shorter version of my father’s story was in *The New Yorker*.”]

In the online *Salon* interview [website below], Trillin writes, “I’ve written on Jewish things, and what I write often has Yiddish in it. The problem has been, if you don’t have a Jewish name you have to be careful what you write about Jewish subjects. Because Jews can say some things about Jews that Gentiles can’t -- the same way black writers can say some things about black subjects that whites can’t.” How do you feel about this comment? Do you think it is a particularly American characteristic? Also consider what Trillin says about ethnic humor (34; 44; 58).

Do you think Trillin was influenced more by his Jewishness or by being a Midwesterner? [Consider how the humor of both intersect (44); Consider his father’s attitude toward religion (97-98).]

How does growing up in a town that had a “paucity of ethnics” (31) affect a person’s concept of society?

What does Trillin mean by “the immigrant’s fearfulness (57)?” [Consider his father’s attitude toward “refugees” who did not become “Americanized at a pace commensurate with what they owed this country and what made good sense” (95).]

“Writing about your family is tricky business,” Trillin states in the same interview. What qualities do you think a writer has to possess to allow distance from the subject? Do you think it is easier or more difficult to write about someone you know intimately? Consider the following passage from the obituary of Christopher Robin Milne, 22 April 1996: Mr. Milne described his father as a man who used his small son's youth to stave off his own middle age. “When I was three, my father was three,” he wrote. “When I was six, he was six,” adding “he needed me to escape from being 50.” He said his father kept his only child at a distance: “His heart remained buttoned up all through his life.” He also resented the confusing of his childhood with popular legend, and he himself could not remember whether it was the real or fictional Christopher Robin who invented the game of “Pooh sticks,” dropping sticks from a wooden bridge into a flowing stream. [Trillin refers to this obituary in the *Salon* interview referenced below.]

Was Abe Trillin an “unfulfilled man,” as he did not become the privileged American, a goal that so many immigrants pursued? Discuss.

How do you think Trillin would describe his father’s legacy (or “messages”) as reflected in his own life? Consider Abe Trillin’s own writing skills and aspirations (86-89).

What do you think about Trillin’s comment that “children go through life seeing their parents in terms of themselves” (116)?

Do you think that the relationship between the son and the father is told realistically? How is the narrative affected by its being a memoir?

How would Sukey have written this book differently? [Thanks to Vicki Martin of the Emerson Reader’s Circle for this question.]

Websites:

<http://readmoremissouri.org/> [Website of ReadMore, Missouri's statewide reading club; links to writing activities and events]

<http://www.ctrl.org/stover/index.html> [Text of *Stover at Yale*, the novel that so impressed Abe Trillin]

<http://www.classicshorts.com/stories/lastleaf.html> [Text of the story "The Last Leaf" by O. Henry, author favored by Abe Trillin. The tree from this story is purported to be the sycamore in the Trillin backyard in New York.]

http://www.newyorker.com/critics/atlarge/articles/051010crat_atlarge [An editorial article about the past history and present policies on admissions quotas at Ivy League schools; see also page 54: "...there was a widespread feeling in the late thirties that its developer [of the Country Club District] held the prevailing country club views on how few Jews it took to be too many"; also see page 76, when Abe Trillin asks the Yale interviewer if the school had a Jewish quota]

http://www.asianam.org/yale's_quotas_against_jews.htm [Link to an article about the Jewish quota at Yale, based on an interview with Dan Oren, author of *Joining the Club: a History of Jews and Yale*]

<http://www.nps.gov/elis/> [Website of the National Park at Ellis Island, site where many immigrants entered the United States]

<http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/bassr/heath/syllabuild/iguide/antin.html> [A discussion of how to approach the topic of immigration in the classroom, with a bibliography focusing on Jewish-American immigrants]

<http://www.salon.com/weekly/interview960624.html> [*Salon* interview with Calvin Trillin]

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ReadMOre is supported by the Missouri Humanities Council.

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