

Book Review

Nordlinger, J. (2015). *Children of monsters: An inquiry into the sons and daughters of dictators*. NY: Encounter Books.

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I first gained knowledge and interest in *Children of Monsters: An Inquiry Into the Sons and Daughters of Dictators* by seeing an [interview of Jay Nordlinger](#) on C-SPAN. For those interested in child welfare, Nordlinger's work is worth a look. In both the video and the book, Nordlinger reports that writing this exposé was emotionally draining. However, in the end, he was glad that he made the Herculean effort. Interestingly, I would best describe Nordlinger as on the right of the political continuum. With this knowledge, I think he might be a bit shocked to see this positive review and learn that his book is strongly recommended for social work professors, students and practitioners with an interest in child welfare. *Yes, I think reading this book would be a great benefit to professors, students and practitioners within the field of child welfare.*

Nordlinger provides biographical sketches of each dictator's relationship with his (no women dictators) children. Nordlinger provides a comprehensive list of 20 infamous dictators including: Amin, Assad, Bokassa, Castro, Ceausescu, Duvalier, Franco, Hitler, Hoxha, Saddam Hussein, Khomeini, Kim, Mao, Mengistu, Mobutu, Mussolini, Pol Pot, Qaddafi, Stalin, and Tojo. Although I have placed the dictators in alphabetical order here, Nordlinger does not introduce the dictators in the conventional alphabetical format. I found his presentation order a bit curious. In fact, he begins with Hitler who

was never married and officially had no children. According to the author, Jean-Marie Loret claimed to be Hitler's illegitimate son until the day he died in 1985. Most historians do not accept Loret's claim, even though there is a credible facial resemblance between Hitler and Loret. The resemblance is enhanced by the Hitler mustache under Loret's nose. If there is a blood tie between Loret and Hitler, it is irrelevant! Loret believed there was a blood linkage and throughout his life embraced a social script that stressed this linkage. This perceived linkage sets the stage for the rest of the parent-child relationships in the 19 following chapters. Nordlinger shows us that father-child relationships have a profound influence on the adult-child even if the relationship is distant or virtually nonexistent.

For social work students, practitioners and professors, the strength of this book is also its weakness. Although Nordlinger provides an ending chapter that attempts to establish an analysis of patterns within the father-child relationships, I must say the he does a poor job at this. Nordlinger received academic training in political journalism and has little to no experience in social science theory. Thus, he offers brilliant portrayals of the children of monsters, but his presentation is theoretically barren. Frankly, I believe that if he had coauthored his work with a family theorist, *Children of Monsters* would be required reading in many graduate programs for decades.

Paradoxically, the strength of the book in the world of academia could also be seen as the lack of theory. Within the classroom, learning family theory by applying it to reality is a robust manner to learn theory. A professor could have students analyze the material in the book then link appropriate theory to it. This is a great way to make boring theory relevant. Although I like teaching in this manner, I believe that most professors do not.

Nordlinger writes in a folksy, informal manner that is quite foreign to the academic writing for which I have the greatest comfort in reading. He commonly employs a great deal of colloquial expressions that I found unnerving. In my head while reading it, I would often think: "If I had a

student who submitted this sentence, I'd redline it!" Here lies the difference between journalism and academic writing. Academics are expected to write in a neutral and dry manner, while journalists are expected to write in an endearing and attractive manner. Is something lost within colorfully written lines? Perhaps there is, but not significantly so. Nordlinger makes a major contribution to understanding family relationship. Yeah man, this is a groovy piece of paper!