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'Are you in this family, or against it?'



When We Were Bad

by Charlotte Mendelson, Houghton Mifflin; 336 pages, \$24

Yael Goldstein

The sight of a self-obsessed family is not a pretty one. Although to those enclosed within the obsession it constitutes their world entire, outsiders may gaze on the narcissistic myth-making with some degree of horror. This, of course, is what makes such families fine fodder for fiction; think of J.D. Salinger's Glass family, Dara Horn's Ziskinds, or in film, Wes Anderson's Tenenbaums. But it also sets the novelist a difficult task. Readers must be allowed the fun of hating such a family, but can't be allowed to hate them so much that they don't enjoy the story. The reader, in other words, must be made to both care and sneer at the same time. When a writer actually pulls this off, it can make for an enjoyably complex reading experience, and British novelist Charlotte Mendelson, in her third work of fiction, "When We Were Bad," has pulled it off quite well.

It helps that the book is about the Rubin family's dissolution and not, say, their rise to fortune. We meet them, in fact, at their moment of greatest shame: In the midst of a lavishly staged wedding

To write successfully about a narcissistic family requires writing that allows the reader to both sneer at and care about them at the same time. British writer Charlotte Mendelson, in her third novel, pulls off this complex task quite well

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