

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Magill's Literary Annual, 2014 follows a long tradition, beginning in 1954, of offering readers incisive reviews of the major literature published during the previous calendar year. The *Magill's Literary Annual* series seeks to critically evaluate 149 major examples of serious literature, both fiction and nonfiction, published in English, from writers in the United States and around the world. The philosophy behind our selection process is to cover works that are likely to be of interest to general readers that reflect publishing trends, that add to the careers of authors being taught and researched in literature programs, and that will stand the test of time. By filtering the thousands of books published every year down to notable titles, the editors have provided librarians with an excellent reader's advisory tool and patrons with fodder for book discussion groups and a guide for choosing worthwhile reading material. The essay-reviews in the *Annual* provide a more academic "reference" review of a work than is typically found in newspapers and other periodical sources.

The reviews in the two-volume *Magill's Literary Annual, 2014* are arranged alphabetically by title. At the beginning of each volume is a complete alphabetical list of all covered books that provides readers with the title and author. In addition, readers will benefit from a brief description of each work in the volume. Every essay is approximately four pages in length. Each one begins with a block of reference information in a standard order:

- Full Book Title, including any subtitle
- *Author*: Name, with birth year, and death year when applicable
- *First published*: Original foreign-language title, with year and country, when pertinent
- Original language and translator name, when pertinent
- Introduction, Foreword, etc., with writer's name, when pertinent
- *Publisher*: Company name and city, and the number of pages
- *Type of work* (chosen from standard categories):

Anthropology	Fine arts
Archaeology	History
Autobiography	History of science
Biography	Language
Current affairs	Law
Diary	Letters
Drama	Literary biography
Economics	Literary criticism
Education	Literary history
Environment	Literary theory
Essays	Media
Ethics	Medicine
Film	Memoir

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Miscellaneous	Psychology
Music	Religion
Natural history	Science
Nature	Short fiction
Novel	Sociology
Novella	Technology
Philosophy	Travel
Poetry	Women's issues

- *Time*: Period represented, when pertinent
- *Locale*: Location represented, when pertinent
- Capsule description of the work
- *Principal characters* (for novels, short fiction) or *Principal personages* (for bibliographies, history): List of people, with brief descriptions, when pertinent

The text of each essay-review analyzes and presents the focus, intent, and relative success of the author, as well as the makeup and point of view of the work under discussion. To assist readers further, essays are supplemented by a list of additional "Review Sources" for further study in a bibliographic format. Every essay includes a sidebar offering a brief biography of the author or authors. Thumbnail photographs of book covers and authors are included as available.

Three indexes can be found at the end of volume 2:

- **Category Index**: Groups all titles into subject areas such as current affairs and social issues, ethics and law, history, literary biography, philosophy and religion, psychology, and women's issues.
- **Title Index**: Lists all works reviewed in alphabetical order, with any relevant cross references.
- **Author Index**: Lists books covered in the Annual by each author's name.

A searchable cumulative index, listing all books reviewed in *Magill's Literary Annual* between 1977 and 2014, as well as in *Magill's History Annual* (1983) and *Magill's Literary Annual, History and Biography* (1984 and 1985), can be found at our Web site, www.salempress.com, on the page for *Magill's Literary Annual, 2014*.

Our special thanks go to the outstanding writers who lend their time and knowledge to this project every year. The names of all contributing reviewers are listed in the beginning of Volume 1, as well as at the end of their individual reviews.

& Sons

Author: David Gilbert

Publisher: Random House (New York). 448

pp.

Type of work: Novel

Time: 1942–2013

Locale: New York City

& Sons tells the story of two connected New York families over several decades. The novel explores the relationships between fathers and progeny, teachers and students, and authors and their fans.

Principal characters:

ANDREW NEWBOLD DYER, a renowned and reclusive author

RICHARD DYER, Andrew's oldest son, a struggling screenwriter who exiled himself from his family

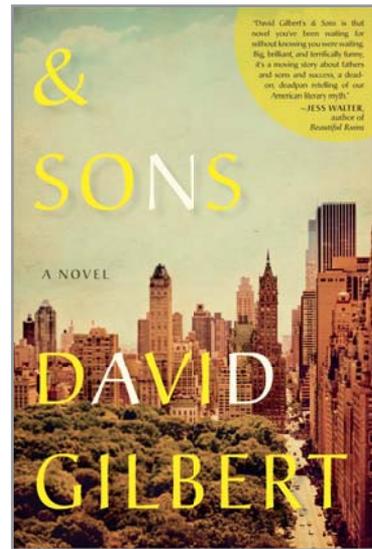
JAMIE DYER, Andrew's middle son, a filmmaker who makes documentaries about human suffering

ANDY DYER, Andrew's youngest son and Jamie and Richard's half brother, whose birth forced Andrew's wife to leave him

PHILIP TOPPING, narrator, son of Andrew's best friend who goes to live with the Dyers after the death of his father

In his novel *& Sons*, author David Gilbert explores the tumultuous Dyer family, particularly their patriarch—seventy-nine-year-old Andrew Newbold Dyer, a celebrated novelist. Although he is successful, Andrew is a secretive man who never gives interviews or makes public appearances. Only one known photo of him exists, which has been used as the author photo for his twelve novels. Real-life author J. D. Salinger, a recluse who denied the press interviews, is an obvious model for Andrew. Despite being widely read author with legions of devoted fans, Andrew is a horrible father. Deprived of a close relationship with their father while growing up, his two oldest sons left home and went their separate ways in life. When the family is summoned to Andrew's luxury apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, New York, they are understandably apprehensive.

The story of the Dyer family is interconnected with that of the Topping family. The novel begins with the funeral of Charles Henry Topping, who was Andrew's best friend when he was young. Andrew attends the funeral and suffers an emotional breakdown while attempting to perform the eulogy. Topping's son Philip—who narrates the novel—witnesses this. He recently separated from his wife and lost his job as a private



(Courtesy of Random House)

school English teacher. Upon hearing of his struggles, Andrew invites Philip to stay at the Dyer apartment until he can get on his feet. Philip accepts. While staying at the apartment, he observes the tribulations and triumphs of the legendary Dyer family firsthand.

Living in the shadow of Andrew's legacy has not been easy for his three sons. His two oldest, Jamie and Richard, struggle to create their own artistic works independent of their father's association. Richard, the oldest, battled drug addiction before moving to Los Angeles to pursue screenwriting. Jamie moved to Brooklyn, but despite being only a subway ride away, he only talks to his father a few times a year. He has found some success as a documentary film maker, traveling to some of the world's most dangerous, war-torn regions to document human suffering.

The third Dyer son is seventeen-year-old Andy, a college student. He is the product of an affair Andrew had with a Swedish woman. Andrew was sixty-two years old when Andy was born. The affair led to the destruction of his marriage to his passionate wife Isabel. Andy—who is home on spring break—occupies most of his time trying to lose his virginity. When he finally meets a girl (first online, then in person) she turns out to be a huge Dyer fan, suggesting that her motives reach beyond a relationship with Andy alone.

Gilbert does a phenomenal job characterizing all of the Dyer men as well as Philip. Gilbert succeeds in portraying Andrew's emotional restraint and inability to express himself to his sons as something endemic to his generation—upper class men of the 1950s. As critic James Wood states in his review of the book for the *New Yorker*, Andrew's sons belong to a “more open, more voluble” generation of children who “must become expert readers of patriarchal gaps and silences” in the attempt to understand the concealed emotions of their parents. This frustrates Andrew's sons. Jamie has given up trying to understand his father, choosing instead to laugh off his bizarre eccentricities. He and Richard are also emotionally distant to each other, but share one of the novel's most touching scenes when they sit at a bar and reflect humorously about their childhoods.

The relationship between the Dyer men is rich with realism. When Richard sees his father for the first time in years—someone he has resented for decades—he cannot help but feel sympathy for the feeble old man Andrew has become. Jeff Turrentine for the *Washington Post* wrote that the authenticity of the relationships in *& Sons* “maintain a kind of immune system that's naturally resistant to plot-manipulating pathogens.”

Nevertheless, Blake Bailey for the *New York Times* found Dyer to be a “dreary cliché” that “Gilbert can't quite transcend.” He argues that Andrew “can scarcely speak except in elaborate platitudes about his vocation.” While there is truth in this, it can also be argued that Andrew's declining physical and mental health have muddled his thought patterns and speech. It may be that he is a highly literate man who has been reduced to communicating in banalities.

The Dyers are the focus of the narrative, but Gilbert strays from the central story several times to focus on subplots and present letters, e-mails, and excerpts from Dyer's fictional novels. His most acclaimed novel is his debut, *Ampersand*, which won him the Pulitzer Prize for literature. The novel's title, *& Sons*, references this

fictional bestseller and the fact that Dyer's sons have been forced to live in its shadow. *Ampersand* also subtly references Andrew's initials, AND. While the novel excerpts provide some interesting insight into the cult that has developed around Dyer, most of the subplots do little more than distract from the main narrative, harming the novel's cohesiveness. For example, one particularly gratuitous distraction Gilbert inserts is a book review—several pages long—of a debut novel from an up-and-coming author. As Wood comments in his review, these subplots and diversions “spread the novel’s illumination along too many pathways.”

In general, the book’s narrative flows nicely thanks to Gilbert’s intelligent prose. However, *& Sons* is not a casual read. The wit of the prose demands the reader’s attention. There is one baffling plot point that feels highly inorganic to the story. This occurs after Andrew summons his sons to his apartment due to his ailing health. He believes he is going to die soon and he pleads with Richard and Jamie to look after Andy after he passes away. Andrew later reveals that Andy was not the product of an affair, but was actually cloned from his DNA by a Swedish organization called the Palingeneticists. It is a bizarre turn and although it is never proven if this is fact or a confused memory of a mentally declining Andrew, Gilbert does not explore the cloning subplot. Is it never made clear what Andrew’s motivations are for wanting a clone of himself. Bailey states in his review that it is “not one of the book’s strong points,” and Wood states, “Gilbert spends precious pages on this narrative silliness.”

Gilbert’s novel is written in the first person through the narrator Philip Topping as well as in omniscient third person. Turrentine explains that “Philip asks readers to have faith in his reliability.” *Boston Globe* critic Madison Smartt Bell states that while “Philip cannot possibly have access to the inner lives of other characters,” this narrative approach “is irritating for the first few pages, but then forgotten.” Philip too has lived in the shadow of Dyer’s literary legacy. He at one time yearned to be a great novelist and looked to his father for guidance, but was denied. Meanwhile, the other Dyer sons have never really taken to Philip. Richard ridicules him for the way he hangs around the Dyers and Jamie pities him. Perhaps the only thing he has in common with his father is that he too sabotaged his marriage with an affair. Despite his literary shortcomings, Philip is an interesting narrator who maintains a witty and insightful tone even during the novel’s most melancholy moments.

Gilbert’s prose is amusing and provides some sharp insights about life in New York City. As Bailey states in his review, “Anyone who’s spent a few formative years in Manhattan . . . will experience piquant shocks of recognition on almost every page.” Gilbert fills his novel with an abundance of clever metaphors and similes. Some of them are quite humorous, while others, as Wood states, can seem “facile or frankly unconvincing.” Wood argues that the abundance of metaphors may “be part of the [book’s] problem.”

The central theme of the novel is the relationship between fathers and sons, although

David Gilbert is the author of the novel The Normals (2004) and the story collection Remote Feed (1998). His stories have appeared in several publications, including The New Yorker, Harper’s, and GQ.

Gilbert's aim is more ambitious than exploring that idea alone. At the heart of the Dyer relationships are their motivations, which Gilbert gradually, but effectively, addresses as the work progresses. These motivations look to the primal desires of men—fame, respect, and, in the case of Andrew, immortality. In the end, Gilbert succeeds in communicating to his readers that what men really need is compassion and understanding.

& Sons is a book rich with spectacular language and intelligent insight. Overall, Gilbert's novel is a compelling and honest story that many readers will relate to.

Patrick G. Cooper
Orlando, Florida

Review Sources

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