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A MAP OF THE WORLD

By Jane Hamilton

Doubleday; 432 pp.

In the medically primitive days when Mahler wrote his "Songs on the Deaths of Children," if a family wanted to raise four children to adulthood the mother would bear eight. Today, it is no less a miracle that a child can pass through the gamut of perils eager to destroy it. One price of parenthood is eternal vigilance.

At the beginning of Jane Hamilton's astoundingly beautiful second novel, Alice Goodwin lets her vigilance slip for a couple of minutes. Living with her husband, Howard, and two pre-school daughters on a dairy farm in Prairie Center, Wisconsin, Alice exchanges babysitting days with her only friend, Theresa Collins, whose daughters are about the same age as Alice's.

One scorching June morning, as one girl screams from the toilet while the other three grow impatient to swim in the Goodwin pond, the harried Alice runs upstairs for her bathing suit, stopping a moment to look at her map of the world. She'd made the map in childhood, after her mother's death, imagining it her place of "ideal solitude" where she could be "always alone, composed and serene as an angel in the midst of great natural beauty."

When Alice comes downstairs, Theresa's younger girl has vanished. Moments later, Alice finds toddler Lizzie drowned.

Like Kafka's "Metamorphosis," Hamilton's story begins with its climax. Everything that happens stems from Alice's moment of relaxed attention.

Her sorrows have just begun. That October, at the elementary school where Alice works as the school nurse, she treats six year-old Robbie Mackessy for the 27th time. Alice tells Robbie's repugnant, neglectful mother, "If he keeps coming to school sick, I'll report you."

But Lizzie's death has forever robbed Alice of the luxury of calling another parent negligent. "I'll report *you*," Mrs. Mackessy snaps back.

Shortly, two police officers arrive at the Goodwin farm to arrest Alice for child sexual molestation. She's charged with touching Robbie inappropriately. And others, too: a junior high girl whose spine Alice had felt when a gym teacher asked her to check the girl for scoliosis, a first grader Alice had held around the waist while he screamed over a loose tooth.

Frivolous charges? Not in the 1990s, when child and sexual abuse form the heart of many therapists' practices and provide standard fare on daytime tabloid t.v. Still

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numbed with pain and guilt over Lizzie's death, Alice hears the judge set bail at an impossible \$100,000 and trudges off to jail.

Like Camus's Meursault, Alice may actually stand trial less for her formal charge than for being an outsider. They'd arrived years earlier in Prairie Center with a black friend who helped them set up the farm. During his two-month stay, Alice recalls, "No one spoke to us, or offered a friendly word, or welcomed us with a potted plant or a casserole. It was as if we didn't exist, not only that first summer, but for years after." Bank tellers slapped a NEXT WINDOW sign on the counter when Alice approached. Now, Alice will get what outsiders deserve.

Building tension brilliantly through the voices of Alice and Howard, Hamilton steers us through the moment-to-moment ordeals of both: a moment's distraction causing the death of a child, that excruciating breach of the natural order; the struggle to stay afloat in the sea of a vengeful community's hostility. Howard, the "poetical farmer" who said of Alice "there wasn't much point to having the years pass if she wasn't along for the ride," tries to buoy her courage and care for a farm and two small children without the hub through which the spokes of all their lives passed.

The final third of the novel, relating Alice's months of incarceration and her court trial, becomes a riveting exploration of inner strength and compassion, as Alice faces felons who beat her and neighbors bent on destroying her. She knows all the while that her family--if it survives--will never be the same. And Howard knows they must leave the farm, their "self-made paradise," because the mud slung by a sexual abuse charge is indelible, needing no conviction for its stain to set forever.

On one level this is a fiercely contemporary story. Like Richard Bausch's *Rebel Powers* and especially Rosellen Brown's *Before and After*, it probes how society's most elemental cohesive factor, family love, gets bent and twisted in the crush of external events. On that level alone, Hamilton's book is superlative, placing adrift in the same boat a couple whose capacity for love may be their only beacon through the murky fog of an alienated world, and may not be enough.

Yet, *A Map of the World* is also the oldest tale of Western humanity: the fall from grace and expulsion from paradise. Hamilton seems keenly aware of her novel's mythic depth and evocations, spinning a cat's cradle of ironies and allusive echoes ranging from the Bible and Shakespeare to Gerard Manley Hopkins and Rogers & Hammerstein. Long before the last page is reluctantly turned, she has removed all doubt that she belongs among the major writers of our time.