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TRY TO REMEMBER

By Zane Kotker

256 pp.

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Zane Kotker's issue-driven fourth novel reminds us how delicate the balance of family happiness can be. Harvey and Claire Fairchild find themselves content as their grown, mildly spoiled daughters leave Philadelphia for life on their own in New York. However, when elder daughter Phoebe, depressed and lonely, visits a psychotherapist, the Fairchilds find their world suddenly shattered. Phoebe, at the neophyte counselor's prompting, recalls wispy memories of childhood sexual abuse performed by her father and ignored by her mother. By skillfully shifting among the viewpoints of all four Fairchilds and the therapist, Ms. Kotker renders sympathetic the character and motives of people irreconcilably opposed. At the heart of the conflict is Phoebe, her pain and her desire to please. Was she betrayed by the earliest people she tried to please, her parents, or is she being lured by the therapist parent figure she is now trying to please, who may, in turn, be beguiled by her own mentor's obsession with sexual abuse? The novel explores with equal sensitivity the nuances of family relationships and of client/therapist relationships, and sifts the equally devastating consequences of childhood sexual abuse and of recalling possibly false memories. Were the Fairchilds loving, or too loving? Are some therapeutic approaches sincere products of new awareness or monomaniacal resistance to letting light in through any but one window? Ms. Kotker's didactic intentions make a few scenes feel composed and cause her to telegraph some of her punches, but the gravity of the issues she confronts makes those punches weighty nonetheless.