

Three books evoke the charms, and trials, of modern fatherhood.

You've come a long way, daddy

BY MICHAEL LINDGREN

Ugly ties and superfluous power tools aren't the only things being wrapped up for Father's Day this year. In our post-feminist, recession-wracked era of unconditional love, flex time and gender-neutral diaper stations, the very definition of fatherhood itself is under constant revision. These three books are wildly different, but they share a warmth and emotional openness that would have been utterly foreign to men of my grandfather's generation.

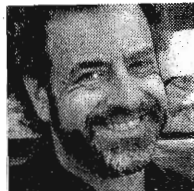
Bruce Feiler's **The Council of Dads: My Daughters, My Illness, and the Men Who Could Be Me** (Morrow, \$22.99) leads off the pack in sobering fashion. In 2008, Feiler, the indefatigable author of "Walking the Bible," received a diagnosis of a rare form of bone cancer, forcing him to confront every parent's nightmare: considering the life his two very young daughters would have without him. With



Bruce Feiler

this in mind, Feiler convened a "council of dads," six close friends whose cumulative presence would serve as a composite surrogate father to his girls. The men Feiler enlisted are a murderers' row of compassion and wisdom, exemplars of "a new kind of maleness" who "talk about things that were once the exclusive domain of women's magazines and daytime chat shows: our children, our feelings, even our bodies." Fortunately, Feiler's medical treatment — which he documents in a series of harrowing journal entries — has proved to be effective. There may be no need for the council, but Feiler's conversations with his potential stand-ins are candid and moving. "The Council of Dads" exemplifies the mysterious process by which bad news can alter our perspective and reorder our priorities, and it celebrates the ever-expanding level of emotional intimacy that men are increasingly free to engage.

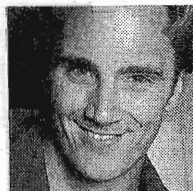
Just because Donald N.S. Unger holds a PhD and has "a stake in opening up the definition of family and of family roles," doesn't mean he's not ready to kick some ass. What jumps out from **Men CAN: The Changing Image and Reality of Fatherhood in America** (Temple, \$25) is not its careful sociological analysis, but rather Unger's un-academic irritability when confronted with what he considers stifling stereotypes. "I'm not being a mother," he snarls, mid-diaper, at one feckless woman. "I'm being a parent." Semiotics aside, Unger is especially illuminating on the role of the media and other cultural forces in



Donald Unger

shaping our shared perceptions. For instance, he exposes as fundamentally reactionary and unhelpful all those "Doofus Dad" ads, in which inept men are parodied as "substantially incapable of doing work that they don't want to do anyway." The book is incisive and fair-minded, too, about the competing agendas that often surround parenthood. Unger notes that feminists, for example, may feel encroached upon by men's relatively recent arrival to the domestic sphere, but he concludes that to fall victim to infighting is to participate in a "circular firing squad." Although at times Unger gets lost in his pet analyses — such as a long examination of the short-lived, now-forgotten sitcom "Kevin Hill" — in general, "Men CAN" is succinct and persuasive.

Which is fine, except that sometimes even ill-tempered social scientists need to laugh. It's a relief, then, to turn to **No Wonder My Parents Drank: Tales From a Stand-Up Dad** (Simon & Schuster, \$25). A title like that doesn't exactly raise high literary expectations, so it takes a while to realize that Jay Mohr is not as dumb as he looks. In his unobtrusive way, he has sincere and perceptive things to say about the rewards of fatherhood. That said, on a certain level the only objective way to evaluate this kind of book is to meter how frequently it produces, by fair means and



Jay Mohr

foul, audible laughter. Judged this way, "No Wonder My Parents Drank" is masterly, especially when Mohr does things like experiment with adult diapers. Poop jokes aside, Mohr is unabashed about his love for his son and the ways that being a parent has made him a better person. This, in a small, unlikely way, is remarkable. Mohr, after all, is a celebrity; he lives in Hollywood. Being a shallow, self-absorbed jerk is practically part of his job description, and yet here he is saying, "I am an 'I love you' type of guy. . . . We are the first generation of 'I love you' dads." Like Bruce Feiler and Donald Unger and millions of other fathers, he's not afraid to value communication and empathy. That's good news for everybody.

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