



Andrew Solomon's monumental work, "Far From the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity," (Simon and Schuster) began as an assignment from the *New York Times* to write a piece on deaf culture.

"I was very struck as I worked on the *Times* article about the parallels between the deaf experience and the gay experience," Solomon, who is gay, said during a telephone interview from his home in New York City. "Then, many years after the article was published, I had a friend of a friend who had a daughter who was a dwarf and was facing questions again. How much do you give your child a separate sense of identity. Or if you're different, here's how we dealt with it and here's how to get her to integrate with the rest of the general population."

It was at this point that Solomon, a 2001 National Book Award winner for "Noonday Demon," a chronicle of his battle with depression, realized these experiences must happen in other "different" cultures, too.

After 11 years of intensive research and hundreds of interviews with families who are raising "different" children, Solomon's ground-breaking 960-page book was published in November of 2012 and it landed on almost every critic's "best of" the year list.

The book is divided into 12 chapters, including deaf, dwarf, autism, transgender, down syndrome, prodigies, crime, rape and multiple severe disabilities.

While the subject matter seems heavy and dark, Solomon – and his readers – have found sources of light and strength running through its pages.

"Dealing with the topics in the book gave me a sense of resiliency and the bountiness of love; and it gave me a greater certainty than I ever had that I could love whatever child I might have," Solomon reflected. "It's not a book about everything that can go wrong. It's a book about love and joy that can be in the experience when everything goes wrong. That is what I felt."

The book begins with deafness and works its way up to the more difficult chapters.

"I feel like the support for deafness is stronger than the support for multiple severe disabilities," he said, explaining the book's structure. "I felt it was a better way to build the argument."

The book has already won the National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction, won an award from Books for a Better Life and was named one of The New York Times' best books of 2012. In addition, it has won the J. Anthony Lukas award; the Anisfield-Wolf Award; Yale University's Research Advocacy Award; the GRASP Friend and Benefactor award; the Fountain House Humanitarian Award; the Mike Wallace Award of the University of Michigan; the Columbia Gray Matters Award; and the Distinguished Achievement Award in Nonfiction of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency.

Kim Burlingham, a Winnsboro pediatrician, says the book has made her a better doctor.

"As a general pediatrician I have had but a handful of deaf children, a bigger handful of Down Syndrome kiddos and children on the autism spectrum and actually one deaf, autistic child who has Down Syndrome but never enough of each group to build and master the rich

Andrew Solomon's 'Far From The Tree' – Changing the way we view differences, one story at a time

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tapestry of each issue,” Burlingham said. “For example, I had never understood why several of my deaf patients opted to ‘turn off’ their cochlear implants. I thought it was just an individual choice but now I can empathize with the deaf culture, and I actually ‘get it.’ In several chapters it was like being a fly on the wall of some of my personal patients’ homes, seeing what I did not get to see in the walls of my medical office.”

Solomon's been a guest on ABC's Katie Couric show, has been invited back for a second show and is in high demand as a speaker.



I attended his lecture at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth last month. He held the capacity crowd in the palm of his hand for more than an hour, but it seemed like a mere 10 minutes, so elegant was his speaking manner and so complete was his knowledge of his subject matter.

“When you're up on stage, time does seem to fly,” he noted of an earlier public appearance at the New York Public Library prior to the book's publication.

Solomon's format is to give a lot of data about a particular condition and then share stories from interviews he did with the parents, children and family members. The data can be overwhelming at times to a lay person, but the personal anecdotes drive the reader forward.

One of the more striking stories in Solomon's book comes in the chapter on crime.

The author had the opportunity to interview Tom and Sue Klebold, parents of Dylan Klebold, who, along with Eric Harris, went on a shooting spree at Columbine High School in Colorado in 1999, killing 13 and wounding 23, before turning their guns on themselves.

The Klebolds didn't leave the Denver area after the tragedy. They kept on with their lives, as best they could, but refused to speak to the press.

Then, Sue Klebold attended a lecture Solomon gave at a mental health association gathering in Denver.

“After the event, one of the organizers said, ‘There was someone here who doesn't really come out that often and we were surprised to see here,’” Solomon explained.

Turns out that someone was Sue Klebold.

“I was in the middle of writing a chapter of how families dealt with having children who committed crimes, so obviously, my ears perked up,” the author said.

No one at the event had the Klebolds' contact information, so Solomon wrote the couple a letter.

His first attempts to connect were rejected.

“They wrote back and said, ‘No, we don't want to do this,’” he said. “I asked them to

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reconsider. We went back and forth and back and forth. Finally, they agreed to meet me one day for 15 minutes for a cup of coffee.”

Once they met, Solomon became aware of how badly they wanted to tell their story, but understood their reluctance to trust anyone.

“I said, ‘Look, I’m open to telling your story as clearly and as honestly as I can. That’s as much as I can promise. I am not here to be a destructive force in your lives,’” Solomon said as he related the events. “It was a long process about how learning to communicate with each other before they really understood I was trustworthy.”

Solomon went to the Klebold house determined to ferret out what went wrong. Instead, he grew even more puzzled how such a troubled child could have come from such a lovely home.

“They are really wonderful people,” Solomon noted. “I just don’t understand where it came from. This is getting even more bewildering. After years with them, I can clearly and definitively say, it’s who they really are.”

Solomon said it’s hard to pinpoint what happened with Dylan.

“There are kids who have snapped because they felt they had no privacy and their parents were so intrusive,” he states. “It’s difficult to say which is the worst mistake.”

The Klebolds were unaware of their boy’s troubles.

□ *“I used to think I could understand people, relate, and read them pretty well,” Sue said. “After this, I realized I don’t have a clue what another human being is thinking.”*

While visiting in their home, Solomon asked the couple what they’d want to ask Dylan.

Tom said, *“I’d ask him what the hell he was thinking and what the hell he was doing!”*

□ □ □ *Sue looked down at the floor for a minute before saying quietly, “I would ask him to forgive me, for being his mother and never knowing what was going on inside his head, for not being the person that he could confide in.”*

Solomon’s compassion and accepting nature obviously gave the Klebolds – and others who feel disenfranchised – a safe place to discuss the impact that being different has on their lives.



Another chapter in the book deals with child prodigies. One of them is jazz pianist Christian Sands. Sands, 23, and his parents had no difficulty opening up to Solomon.

“He was very easy to talk to,” Sands said during a telephone interview from his home in New York City. “He was very nice.”

Sands began playing the piano before he learned to walk.

He was enrolled in music classes by age 4 and was composing by age 5 and released his first record, “Footprints,” at age 12. At the 2006 Grammys, he performed an unscheduled piano duet with the late, great Oscar Peterson, who got up out of a wheelchair to play with the youngster.

Sands is currently touring, teaching and working on his masters from Manhattan School of

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Music.

When people ask him how long he's been playing, he says, "Well, since I've been breathing because that's what it is to me. It's breathing. I wasn't like other kids."

But Sands says he didn't know he was different.

"The funny thing is – we've never used the word prodigy," he said of his upbringing. "It's something I've always done. People don't think it's normal, but this [my life] is just normal."

The McKerrow family from Helena, Montana, also found their way into Solomon's book. On first blush, they seem as normal as white bread.

Loren McKerrow, was an eye doctor. His wife, Carol, is a former Miss Lake Whitney USA. The family adopted a son, Marc, and almost immediately Carol found herself pregnant with another son, Paul. Then a second biological son, Todd, joins the family.

Paul was quarterback of the football team, voted "best looking" and was valedictorian of his class.

In his 20s, however, Paul transitioned from a male to a female through gender reassignment surgery. He changed his name to Kimbery Reed and became a filmmaker.



Kim Reed's award-winning documentary, "Prodigal Sons," chronicles her first trip home – as a female – for a class reunion. It also details the struggles of her adopted brother, Marc, who finds out he is the biological son of Rebecca Welles. His biological mother was the daughter of Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth. They never knew about their grandson.

Reed met Solomon at an artists' retreat in upstate New York.

"It was at about the same time that I was almost ready to go show my film," Reed said during a telephone conversation from her home in New York City. "The first time I showed the film in my hometown was actually at [our] church."

Solomon accompanied Reed to Helena because, as she says, "It was a great way to meet my family and to see me in the context of my family. There had been some pretty tough stories about transgender people in the book and I think he was interested in having a happy ending story."

Reed, who has also appeared on Oprah with her mother – her father died – was happy to have Solomon include her in the book.

"I wouldn't choose anybody else to be at the helm," she said. "Andrew is just such a good spokesperson of all of this. He handles himself magnificently."

Reed also credits Solomon's work in "Noonday Demon" with moving her toward a clearer understanding of Marc, who suffered a severe brain injury in a car accident and battled his share of demons until his sudden death in 2010.

"The book really helped me understand what my brother was going through," she noted. "It's easy to find guilt and judge people and hold them responsible for a busted brain the same way

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we would hold them responsible for a busted ankle.”

According to Reed, Solomon's work is extraordinary because “a lot of times nonfiction comes across as work that is very scrupulously researched and meticulous and impressive in its scholarly work. And then other times you find works that have a really big heart. It's exceedingly rare to find works that combine the two, especially in the way Andrew does. He raises the bar. The fact that he can combine such a huge heart with such immense respectable scholarship is very inspiring in and of itself.”

During the writing of his book, Solomon himself became a parent. He fathered two children, a boy who lives with him and his husband, John, and a girl who lives with her mother in Fort Worth.

“A lot of people have said to me, ‘It's so surprising that you chose to have a family in the middle of writing this book about everything that can go wrong,’” the writer commented. “The resiliency of these families was impressive. What I found was empathy and compassion.”

In addition to parental longing, Solomon says his decision to have children was impacted by how far we've come.

“My son is in a class that has another two-dad family,” he explained. “My daughter had someone with disabilities in her class and we talked about it and how important it is to be nice to that person and have them as a friend. It's a more inclusive world. Any of the people in the categories I describe in my book are better off than they would have been 25 years ago.”

Solomon, whose other books are about Russian artists and a novel about his mother's death, is pleased with this book's reception.

“I feel like it's a very important conversation to be taking place and I feel privileged to play any role in it. We are at a moment in our social development when people are actually contemplating the idea that perhaps difference isn't all so terrible. Perhaps there is a validity in experiences different from one's own.”

Then, Solomon grew thoughtful.

“The theme in all four of my books is managing to find strength in adversity. I'm trying to convert a painful experience into an occasion for dignity.”

Job well done. Bravo!

To watch the official trailer for “Far From the Tree,” visit

<http://youtu.be/2bWH0DD800I>

To hear Christian Sands and Oscar Peterson at the 2006 Grammys, visit

<http://youtu.be/fYpoWD1qmEA>

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To hear Kimberly Reed tell her story, check out <http://youtu.be/U2LePWwkZzg>

For more information on the book, visit www.farfromthetree.com