

utting on the
evenings



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TIPO



FAMILY FOOD

Giving thanks
for a meal that
redefines kinship

By **RUTH S. BLAU**
Special to The Journal

Holidays are family times. And despite dire warnings from politicians and sociologists, the family is not dead. It is simply, in our fractured times, being redefined.

Take, for example, the family that gathers at my house for Thanksgiving dinner. It includes two or three grown children (some mine, some my husband's), depending on who is in the country and who can get home from college.

Dinner also includes my mother, in her mid-80s, and my father, 79. It includes my ex-husband and his elderly father. It includes some dear friends who are regulars, occasionally some new friends, and my husband and me.

Strange, you might think, but it works and we have a wonderful celebration. We also mirror the way American families are changing.

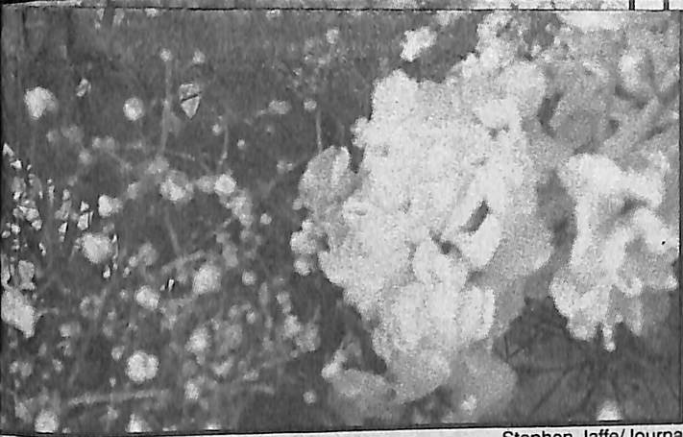
Indeed, the more or less isolated nuclear family — mother, father, a couple of kids — is a 20th-century phenomenon. In earlier times, our own agrarian past, for example, large extended families lived near one another and often functioned as an economic unit. Industrialization and rapid transportation gradually changed all that.

More recently, safe contraception and the high cost of raising children have limited family size in the U.S. — children became more of an economic liability than a valued extra pair of hands on the farm.

Too, the easing of divorce laws in state after state has meant increasing numbers of divided families. As you can see from our example, however, a divided family is not an indicator that no family exists.

It's just that families are changing, as the following statistics tend to show.

At a time when U.S. population is growing at about one percent per year, the number of divorces per one thousand population is going down, from 5.3 in 1981 to 4.9 in 1984, the most



Stephen Jaffe/Journal

adding author should read at least 100 romances in
se she is wasting her time."

2g THE PROSE

Harlequin writer

The business of love

■ Harlequin Romance, which represents 80 percent of the romance-publishing world, prints 54 titles a month in 15 languages and distributes them to 90 countries.

■ More than 200 million faithful Harlequin romance readers bought \$250 million worth of books in 1985.

■ Virtually all romance readers are women 15 and over.

■ 40 percent are college educated and 35 percent are employed full time.

■ 30 percent have an annual income of \$30,000 or higher.

learn that following the publisher's tip sheets — which require 50-100,000 words about two people in love in a time-less setting — is a lot harder than they anticipated. Harder still, for the unpublished writer is selling the manuscript. With the national market producing 80 romances a month, there is "virtually an explosion of writers," says Seidel.

In the Washington Romance Writers organization, which boasts more than 100 members, about 40 have been published.

And publication does not ensure great monetary rewards. If a writer produces three books a year, she probably will make no more than a total of \$10,000. And once published, say romance writers, an author has to keep producing if she wants to stay recognized by the publisher.

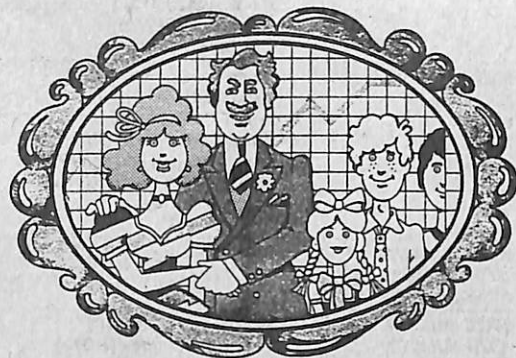
"The sales process is a real drag," says Susan Andrews, 28, of Rockville, Md., who won the 1986 Romantic Writers of America Golden Heart Award for her manuscript "Fair Game," which will hit the stands next July.

According to Andrews, the publishing industry is looking for new writers to freshen up a stagnant market, but "will not beat a path to your door, regardless of your talent."

"There were promises in the early '80s, when the market peaked, that this would be easy," says Seidel whose first

Please see ROMANCE, B3

recent year for which statistics are available. Another encouraging statistic: In 1982, ac-



Bernie Cootner/Newsday

cording to the 1986 Statistical Abstract of the United States, 48.5 percent of all divorced women remarried.

Further redefining the new family, in 1984 nearly two million couples — not including gay and lesbian couples — lived together without benefit of marriage. This is the famed POSSLQ crowd, Persons of the Opposite Sex Sharing Living Quarters, in the immortal prose of the Census Bureau.

Nearly half of these two million were in the prime child-rearing years of 25 to 44; about half (both men and women) have never married; and just under a third had children younger than 15 in the household.

What do these statistics mean? They mean that we are on our way to creating the new extended family. Or, if you prefer, "official" and "unofficial" families.

In her 1978 book "Families," sociologist Jane Howard defines an "unofficial" family member as "anyone whose death or suffering would undo me as much as that of a relative."

I, too, have an official and an unofficial family. While my official family (related by blood or law) gathers for Thanksgiving, my unofficial family comes together once a year for the Passover Seder.

It began about a decade ago, with a small office group, some of whom wished to participate in a Seder but lacked either time or money to go home for the holiday. Now, 10 years later, it is so important to us that we shape our lives around it.

Last spring, for example, my husband and I were to go to Australia (business for him, holiday for me). But, we agreed, we had to be back in time for the Seder — and not just back but enough recovered from jet lag to be able to enjoy the festival.

Our Seder family has a core of eight people who always attend; not all are Jewish. In addition, we include guests, who may come once or may repeat several years. We are never fewer than a dozen and have gone as high as 15.

I particularly enjoyed the year that our group included a young Vietnamese couple who had just become American citizens.

Like many official families, we have our jokes. We never, for example, warn guests that they are about to bite into a solid chunk of horse radish, a mind-clearing exercise if ever there was one.

My new extended ("unofficial") family includes those people to whom people used to be related by marriage. I recall, for example, a Christmas dinner some years ago at Aunt Billie's. She is not my aunt, but my friend Brenda's ex-husband's aunt.

Brenda, remarried and temporarily living in this area, had always been close to Aunt Billie, a

Please see FAMILY, B3

Confessions of a Harlequin romance writer

ROMANCE from B1

manuscript sold in less than a week. "The unpublished romance writers of today feel a little betrayed."

But part of the problem, adds Seidel, is that these same writers "do not have any sense of the reader."

One key to selling successfully is word of mouth sales, says romance writer Marilynne Rudick, 39, of Chevy Chase, Md.

"It's difficult to build momentum in terms of selling a lot of books," points out Rudick, but if a reader likes a book, "she will recommend the author to her friends."

In romance circles, readers look for books by writers they think produce "good reads," says writer Marolyn Wilson, 52 of Rockville, Md. "And a good read is a fast read."

Wilson explains that romance writers learn quickly they can not afford to write slow-paced stories, populated with cardboard characters based on an outdated style.

"The nature of romance has

changed over the last five years," says Rudick. "In the past, the central misunderstanding between a strong hero and young, inexperienced girl might have been cleared up if the two characters had talked for 10 minutes."

"But today's romance focuses on life conflicts between complex people. Their problems involve career choices or lifestyle conflicts, not situations that can be handled in one discussion."

In Seidel's latest novel, "Don't Forget to Smile," the relationship between the heroine and her mother, says the author "is as important as with her hero." That kind of reality is almost unheard of in the traditional romance series. But it could mean a longer shelf life for the book.

Do romance writers compare notes? Seidel laughs.

"We are a very small, active and close community," says Seidel, who recalls one particular New York "Harlequin slumber party" with a group of romance writers.

"We gossiped all night about our husbands, babies and the value of the daughter."

Barbara Mathias is a Journal staff writer. Cynthia Richey is a freelance writer.

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* DOLBY STEREO

A new kind of family

FAMILY from B1

widow in her 70s. Brenda's ex-husband Bob lived on the West Coast, but was coming East with his new wife for the holidays. Brenda, a great organizer, invited us all to Christmas dinner at Aunt Billie's.

The cast of characters that night looked like this: Brenda and her second husband Tracy; Bob and his new wife; Brenda and Bob's son Brad; Brenda's good friends Russell and Terry (who have since split and married others) and their son; myself, my ex-husband and our children (I had not yet remarried).

Presiding over it all was Aunt Billie, the matriarch. It was a memorable meal, not for any fireworks it might have produced, but for the sense of connection to friends, relatives and used-to-be relatives.

This brings me back to holiday time at my house, where three generations from at least five former and present nuclear families gather in harmony as one family.

Jeff, my husband's middle son from his first marriage, and my ex-husband Peter — who is a permanent fixture at our holiday celebrations — have become good friends.

And when Amy and Bruce (my children from my marriage to Peter) are in town, Jeff is included when they go out to dinner or to the movies with their dad. These young people

ple — all in their 20s — seem quite content with their multi-parent extended family.

Each year, as we sit down to break bread, we raise our glasses to give thanks that we are all again gathered to celebrate the harvest. And each year we understand that we are celebrating something else: family, regardless of how it is defined.

Happy Holidays from WGN

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