

House of Happy Endings

Leslie Garis

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Howard Garis, creator of the famed Uncle Wiggily series, along with his wife, Lilian, were phenomenally productive writers of popular children's series--including "The Bobbsey Twins "and "Tom Swift--"from the turn of the century to the 1950s. In a large, romantic house in Amherst, Massachusetts, Leslie Garis, her two brothers, and their parents and grandparents aimed to live a life that mirrored the idyllic world the elder Garises created nonstop. But inside The Dell--where Robert Frost often sat in conversation over sherry, and stories appeared to spring from the very air--all was not right. Roger Garis's inability to match his parents' success in his own work as playwright, novelist, and magazine writer led to his conviction that he was a failure as father, husband, and son, and eventually deepened into mental illness characterized by raging mood swings, drug abuse, and bouts of debilitating and destructive depression. "House of Happy Endings "is Leslie Garis's mesmerizing, tender, and harrowing account of coming of age in a wildly imaginative, loving, but fatally wounded family.

House of Happy Endings Details

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From Reader Review House of Happy Endings for online ebook

Nora says

I really need to read this book again to discuss it properly. Imagine, a family of writers. The author, Leslie Garis, is the daughter of Howard and Lillian Garis. Howard and Lillian both wrote for the Stratemyer Syndicate and under their own names. Howard was the more famous, known for His Uncle Wiggily stories. Leslie's father, Roger Garis was also a writer. She tells his story with love and dignity. His was not a happy ending--Roger, the son of famous parents, suffered a mental breakdown. Leslie tells this story with love and grace.

Lisa says

No fancy genre-busting writing, but a good straightforward literary family disintegration story. She has a light touch, which kept it from degenerating into some horrorshow of dysfunctional melodrama -- at times it seems almost dispassionate. I never got all that involved with the characters, as interesting as they and their stories were. I hear a whooole lot of therapy under the surface... I'm sure the only way to have survived growing up like that was to learn how to keep it all a bit at arm's length.

Andrea says

Leslie Garis is apparently the granddaughter of the man who wrote Uncle Wiggily and Laura Lee Hope, of Bobbsey Twin fame (not her real name). There were dark secrets lurking in their cozy little rabbit hole - or you know, the usual - generational strife, prescription medication addiction. It's interesting to learn a little more about some mysterious figures of my youth. It's sad sometimes though, to see idols fall. Leslie seems to have emerged relatively well from a youth that had very high points and very low ones. I'd love to know more about her grandmother's story. I think she would too. It was an interesting perspective on how sometimes you miss fully knowing even people who are very close to you.

Gina Lutes says

Loved this insight into depression and drug addiction seen through a child's eyes. Very real, vivid and beautifully written. The author made the focus her father and I found myself searching for the mother's reactions and states of mind. I think the author knew the father much better, may her mother was a very private person and did not allow the kids see how she suffered. This is so typical of a mother to try and protect the kids as much as possible and hide her own suffering. Daddy however was so self centered he did not care who he burdened.

Doreen says

I love how this book is written. The author, granddaughter to the creator of 'Uncle Wiggily' and contributor to 'The Bobbsey Twins' series, shares the most beautiful memories of her childhood. Of course, as the story progresses there are more unhappy memories than happy ones. With great brilliance often comes great sorrow and torment. This is true with the Garis family.

Both Grandmother and Grandfather have been successful authors for most of their lives. Their son, the author's father, has published, but he is never able to reach the level of success of his parents. I can identify with the author as she observes the members of her family. She needs to know them and to understand their motives, frailties, and destructive pasts. I understand that need to find the truth in our families, and the desire to know what makes those closest to us 'tick'.

The father's downward spiral into mental illness is painful to watch. The author handles all of this beautifully. In her quest to understand the havoc around her, she manages to relate the story with a kind and gentle writing style. She and her brothers bear many scars from their parents' inability to provide a healthy home for them. It's a unique look into just how debilitating and destructive mental illness is within an otherwise loving family.

Initially, the appeal for me was to read about the family responsible for making me happy and keeping me company as I discovered the world of books as a child. It was a real treat to discover that the family lived in places with which I am familiar. They had a home at one point in Cheshire, Ct. The author's mom's family resided in Naugatuck, Ct. The family also has stints in Saybrook and Lyme, both in Connecticut! And Amherst, Ma., holds a special place in my heart, as does the Atkins farm where her mom picked apples to freeze! So, not only was I able to lose myself in the true story of the Garis family, but I easily pictured the locations mentioned throughout the book. Thank you to Leslie Garis for this honest sharing of the most personal subject imaginable; her talented, less-than-perfect family.

Linda says

This is the brutally honest memoir of the Garis family, the Stratemeyer Syndicate's most prolific ghost writers under their house names. The Garis family members also wrote numerous books under their own names.

This book was written by Leslie Garis, granddaughter of Howard Garis (well-known for his Uncle Wiggily stories), his wife Lilian, and son Roger, who was Leslie's father.

One would think that such happy stories came from happy writers. That is certainly not so. Howard Garis seems like he was fine and he was beloved by his family. However, there are hints that Lilian Garis was addicted to opiates from a gallbladder illness in 1930 until her death in 1954. Her granddaughter Leslie found her cold and aloof and very critical of her family. Poor Roger tried all his life to live up to his famous parents. However, Lilian repeatedly told him he would fail. Roger ended up also addicted- to barbiturates- and spent his later years in and out of mental institutions. Leslie speaks of her father with affection from the time they lived in a large house in Amherst, Massachusetts called The Dell in 1946 through the 1950s. The elder Garis couple also had a daughter, Cleo, who wrote a three book series too. Cleo isn't mentioned much in this book. It's said that she emotionally distanced herself from her mother in her teen years. As for Roger's descendants, they all had their problems. Leslie suffered from depression. Her two brothers, Brooks and Buddy (Howard) suffered from severe dyslexia and failed out of several schools. Leslie's children did not escape the family legacy: her two sons also had dyslexia and her daughter suffered from depression at a

young age. However, in these recent times, dyslexia and depression are treatable.

I found it interesting that the Stratemeyers paid Howard and Lilian (and all their ghost writers) a flat fee of \$75 per each written book. There were no royalties and they were bound by silence as to their writing. Howard was good friends with Edward Stratemeyer; Roger admired the man but couldn't help but feel resentment at the way his family was treated. The Garis family spiraled down to money problems after Howard had to support the whole family.

Lilian is credited with writing 34 books. Howard is credited with writing over 500 books and over 15,000 Uncle Wiggily stories (a story appeared in the newspaper six days a week for almost four decades). Roger wrote a series of four books called The Outdoor Boys, but he is mostly known for his work writing for magazines, plays, and a memoir called "My Father was Uncle Wiggily".

R.L.B. Hartmann says

This memoir by Leslie Garis about her dysfunctional family is straightforward and unflinching, bittersweet and memorable for its episodes, detail, and frank assessment of life with the famous literary giants, Lillian and Howard Garis, writers of hundreds of books under the Stratemeyer Syndicate, and known for tomes such as Uncle Wiggily, The Bobbsey Twins, The Motor Boys, and a host of juvenile series books your mother or grandmother (or maybe even you) read, never aware that they were written by only two people. Lillian used her real name on some of them, as did Howard on the Uncle Wiggily books. Most of the content focuses on Howard, her father, whose bouts of depression and elation made for a rocky home life for all concerned. Quite the opposite from the happy portraits he painted for his little readers.

Allison Nack says

This memoir is interesting for it's historical value. It is written by the granddaughter of the authors of the famous children's series Uncle Wiggly and The Bobbsey Twins. Her grandfather wrote Uncle Wiggly and her grandmother wrote The Bobbsey Twin under a pen name. So the memoir basically focuses on her troubled father, who felt he could never live up to the success of his parents and could never get over the emotional abuse dished out by his mother. His parents supported him financially for most of his life and when they came to live with him when they were old, he basically fell apart.

He was a semi-successful playwright on his own, but felt it was never enough. He was prone to deep depressions, addicted to barbiturates and was hospitalized many times. The point of view of the novel changes from the voice of a little girl who worships her father to the voice of a young woman who pities him and can't wait to get away and start her own life. The title of the novel is ironic, because while all the Uncle Wiggly and Bobbsey Twin stories end happily, the house where everyone lived and wrote was full of despair.

Evelyn says

I rarely read non-fiction and I don't know what drew me to this book. I knew nothing about either the author or her famous American writing family. I am so glad I did buy and read it. It is an amazing, brutally honest portrait of the truth behind the facade of a 'happy' family. Tolstoy's 'every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way' certainly applies to the Garis household. The observant eyes of the watchful child that Leslie Garis was miss nothing in this house of inevitably unhappy endings. In beautiful prose she brings to life both characters and settings. Ms Garis does her family no disservice by her honesty. She shows remarkable sensitivity and has incredible empathy with the frailties of all the adults that surrounded her upbringing.

Some books one reads for the prose, some for the story - happily you'll find both in 'The House of Happy Endings'.

Virginia Messina says

I liked this book, but with some reservations.

Leslie Garis is the granddaughter of Howard Garis who wrote for the *Stratemeyer Syndicate* and also authored the *Uncle Wiggily*, stories that appeared in the *Newark Evening News* and later as books. Leslie's grandmother also worked for the Stratemeyers and authored some of the *Bobbsey Twins* books.

This is Leslie's story of growing up in a multi-generational home that included her grandparents. The absolute best thing about this book for me was meeting "Grampy" Howard Garis whose extraordinary creativity—he allegedly wrote some 15,000 stories and 500 books—was easily matched by his sunny disposition and friendly warmth. On page 192, long after he has achieved great fame, a group of neighborhood children knock on the door looking for Uncle Wiggily. "He took a short walk with them, told a story, and signed their *Uncle Wiggily* books." Howard Garis never loses that kindness and generosity even in later years when he becomes an alcoholic.

But the central character here is Leslie's father (Howard's son) who is also a writer, and who suffers from a severe depression that colors everything that happens in their home. The book is essentially a history of Roger Garis's illness. I didn't get any sense of what Leslie's life was apart from that. While she describes each of her father's hospitalizations in great detail (with long quotes from his medical records), she really never talks about friends or social life or school or anything that happens to *her*.

I realize that maybe this is the point—that what she actually remembers about her childhood was a home that was affected in every way by her father's illness. But it didn't feel like the "coming of age" book that the cover promised. Still an interesting read, though, about an American literary family.

Mkotch says

Incredibly sad but I couldn't stop reading, always hoping for a happy ending.

Steffi Rubin says

Gracefully told account of the family of Roger Garis, son of prodigious children's book authors and victim of his parents' morbid expectations of him. The emotional and psychological devolution of the father and family are terribly sad but interestingly observed and described by daughter Leslie. Her perspective and respect for her family--enormously non-judgmental considering the toll it took on her, her brothers and her mother--keep the memoir from becoming melodramatic or self-indulgent. It provides an interesting history of the area around Amherst, MA, not the least of which is the fact that Robert Frost drops in to spend time with her grandfather.

Susan Albert says

I liked this book very much--beautifully written, lovingly recollected, a sadly dysfunctional family observed with compassion and understanding.

The book offers a remarkable look at the complex and often destructive relationships within a family that depended upon the royalty income earned from the grandparents' syndicate mass market books, while at the same time the parents and children (including Garis herself) were embarrassed by the books, which the family seemed, at least in Leslie's retelling, to think of as a little silly, even vulgar. Roger Garis, Leslie's father, raised his literary sights much higher (culturally speaking) than his father's Uncle Wiggly or his mother's Bobbsey Twins. A serious, sensitive playwright with mental health issues, he was distraught when his work was rejected by the New York critics and snobby East Coast literati.

I particularly liked the early part of the book, which is skillfully told through the perception (and the confusions) of a child. But not all the chapters are of the same quality. I felt that the lengthy reports of her father's illness could have been compressed or told narratively, rather than through long quotations of medical documents. For the most part, though, this is a strong and compelling story.

Cheryl says

This was a surprisingly easy read, considering the fact that it was a non-fiction account of an extremely dysfunctional family life. However, like many readers on this board, i found the one chapter that rambled a bit excessively about her father's medical history to be a bit out of character with the easy pace of the rest of the book. That being said , i would still highly recommend this book for an inside and fascinating look at some of the mental anguish/illness that seems to be a common thread in the lives of so many of our poets and playwrights .

Jane says

As a lifetime member of the Uncle Wiggly Fan Club, I jumped on this book when i heard about it. And what

a book! The Bunny Rabbit Gentleman's

dark underbelly is fully exposed here, and it makes compelling reading. Leslie Garis, granddaughter of Howard & Lilian, the powerhouse writers of the Stratemeyer syndicate, gives us a down-the-rabbit-hole look at the family from which Uncle Wiggly came. A classic fifties family on the surface, and . . . a classic dis-functional fifties family underneath. Grampy repeatedly being dragged home from the local bars. Grandma terrorizing everyone in the house. Daddy addicted to pills. Mom having crippling dizzy spells. Kids being kicked out of multiple schools. And little Leslie, spying on all this from the dumb-waiter. I cannot imagine how hard it must have been to write this book as well as she manages to do. But then - she comes from a family of writers!
