

Fractured family: A review of *The Squid and the Whale*

by [Elizabeth Marquardt](#) in the [February 7, 2006](#) issue

A cynical teenager, backpack slung over one shoulder, sighs to his buddy who's just announced his parents' divorce: "Joint custody blows." So begins *The Squid and the Whale*, the *Kramer vs. Kramer* for our time. It tells the story of a divorce not from the adults' point of view—a glamorous Meryl Streep and intense Dustin Hoffman revealing their pain—but from the children's. The parents in *Squid* are portrayed by Laura Linney and Jeff Daniels, first-rate actors cast as utterly unattractive divorcing parents. They are consumed by their own rage and allow much of it to spill over onto their children.

Set in the 1980s in Brooklyn's Park Slope and directed by 36-year old Noah Baumbach, himself a child of divorce, the movie reveals the painful reality of 16-year-old Walt and 12-year-old Frank (played poignantly by Jesse Eisenberg and Owen Kline), who grapple with their parents' breakup amid tortured explorations of their emerging sexual selves.

Anyone who has talked to grown children of divorce—or who is a member of that group—will recognize many of the movie's themes. It shows the reality of joint physical custody, by which childhood is carved up into mom's days and dad's days. It displays children's icky anguish at seeing parents embarking on new sexual adventures and the horror of learning of parents' past infidelities at the same time one learns of the divorce. As one grown child of divorce told me in an interview, describing how for many years he avoided confronting the truth of his parents' breakup: "You don't want to think that your mom's an adulterer."

The movie shows the experience of being left alone. Frank is sent to buy his own Tylenol when he is sick and unintentionally left behind for three days while his parents go on separate trips out of town. Though this last bit seems unbelievable, it echoes a finding of recent research. Compared to their peers who grew up with married parents, the grown children of divorce are three times more likely to agree

with the statement, “I was alone a lot as a child,” and seven times more likely to strongly agree.

The movie raises the question that every child of divorce must ask: “Where do I belong?” Frank searches his features in the mirror and is crushed when his mother says he shares his father’s bone structure. (Physically resembling a parent is a common fear among children of divorce, because it can make a child feel like an outsider in the other parent’s home.)

One night Frank fights with his father and runs away, arriving at his mom’s house while she is upstairs celebrating a new book contract with her boyfriend. Coming downstairs, hair a mess, she is surprised to see Frank: “I need some nights without you guys sometimes.”

Walt satisfies his struggle for belonging by identifying completely with his controlling father, but when he breaks free of his father’s grasp at the end of the movie he is left alone, parentless.

Young people from intact families are often all too aware that children of divorce have a significantly higher divorce rate themselves. Some observe that the children of divorce they have dated seem “anxious” or “like they are from another culture.” In *Squid*, Walt encounters this stigma when the girlfriend he has just spurned says, “My parents told me you probably couldn’t be a good boyfriend, given the model of relationships that you have.”

One-quarter of young adults are grown children of divorce. If one wants to understand and address their experiences, viewing *The Squid and the Whale* is a good place to start.