

How to Cook Your Daughter

reviewed by [Mary Jo Cartledgehayes](#) in the [October 3, 2006](#) issue

In Review



How to Cook Your Daughter: A Memoir

Jessica Hendra with Blake Morrison
ReganBooks

If I had not read *Father Joe*, by Tony Hendra, I might never have read *How to Cook Your Daughter*. Having read the former, though, I felt morally bound to give equal

attention to the latter.

Tony Hendra's 2004 book is a memoir of redemption. After the author was caught in a compromising position with a married woman at age 14, the woman's husband took him to the Isle of Wight to meet the book's title character, a cloistered Benedictine monk. Where Hendra expected condemnation, he found forgiveness, astute good humor and kindness. Monastic life appealed to him, but later, at Cambridge University, he found a different calling: to save the world through comedy—specifically the harsh satire he perfected as a writer and editor at *National Lampoon*.

Hendra's life in New York City in the 1970s was a textbook case of excess, and his friendship with Father Joe was the one constant amid the chaos. Through correspondence and Hendra's visits, Joe remained a lifeline connecting Hendra to the Christian faith. In middle age, with his first marriage destroyed and an affair self-destructing, Hendra returned again to Father Joe for counsel. The solace and forgiveness he found renewed his spirit and became the foundation of a new life of love and commitment.

I felt like a better person after reading about Father Joe. Apparently, other people did too. Andrew Sullivan wrote in the *New York Times* that *Father Joe* belonged "in the first tier of spiritual memoirs," a statement that no doubt contributed to the book's sales of more than 3 million copies.

How to Cook Your Daughter traverses rockier terrain. Jessica Hendra's life was shaped by her father, Tony, and particularly by the three occasions on which, she reports, he molested her. Her story is also a memoir of redemption, which for her has involved a lifelong effort to forgive her father and to reconcile with him.

On the surface, *How to Cook Your Daughter* has far less to do with religion than does *Father Joe*. Perhaps Tony's twisted sense of humor quelled his daughter's spiritual proclivities: When she inquired about the Easter Bunny at age five or six, her father told her that it was "the risen Christ Vampire who comes to suck the blood of little children."

Soon after, he was putting together a radio program for *National Lampoon* and asked Jessica to read the sentence, "What can you expect from a God who crucified his own son?" Immediately after the recording session, he told her that she was going to hell for the words she'd spoken. Jessica relates that she'd seldom been to

church but that she'd "heard all about hell from my dad—the burning bodies, the devil, and the red-hot pokers stuck in your eyes for ever and ever."

The bizarre and inappropriate nature of Tony's behavior is clear in a scene from Jessica's teenage years. Insisting that she accompany him to a bar, he ordered a mixed drink for each of them and then informed her that he was leaving her mother for another woman. Dumfounded by Jessica's dismay, he said, "I thought you'd be happy for me." Then he handed her a packet of cocaine and directed her to take it to the bathroom and indulge.

As a "troubled and angry teen," she says, she wandered the bars of New York City at night. A decade later she was bulimic. After marrying a kind and thoughtful character actor, she gained control of her eating habits, but she didn't realize that her new daily regimen of an apple for breakfast and a salad for lunch had more to do with anorexia than with self-control. The anorexia, at long last, led her to therapy. The therapy led her to acknowledgment of her father's abuse.

In spite of Tony's inadequacies as a religious educator, Jessica's knowledge of the nature of God influenced her decision to speak publicly about her father's behavior. After she read *Father Joe* for the first time, she wrote: "I appreciate that God's love transcends all, that sins can and should be forgiven, but somewhere in that message don't other people exist and isn't there some accountability?"

Some secular publications have classified *How to Cook Your Daughter* as the latest in a long line of "he said, she said" memoirs, but I find no more reason to doubt Jessica's recollections than I did to doubt her father's. Her narrative voice is lucid and trustworthy, and Tony remains for her a genius, "brilliant, funny, and charismatic." Her longing for reconciliation is revealed in her attempts to get him to tell her that her six-year-old self was not responsible for the abuse. He once approached such an admission with a quick "I'm sorry" and the promise of further conversation. When the time came for that conversation, however, he was derisive. "It's a bad habit to make other people responsible for your failures in life," he informed her. He cited the Holocaust and the Khmer Rouge as evidence that "worse things have happened to children." She should consider herself lucky. She should get over it.

How to Cook Your Daughter exemplifies the reasons for and the costs and rewards of a life intent on healing. Jessica Hendra may never completely "get over" her father's abuse, but her courage in publishing this memoir contributes to a climate for

healing. Sullivan, whose review spurred sales of *Father Joe*, has publicly expressed regret for any contribution his remarks may have made to her pain. More important, this book's relevance to Christians—both those who have endured abuse and those who minister to them—rests in its elegant testimony to the ways in which steadfast love can ignite in a wounded soul the desire for change and can also walk with that soul on the long road to wholeness.