

Atomic Family

Ciera Horton McElroy

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The price a family pays for succumbing to the fear of the atomic bomb is at the center of Ciera Horton McElroy's historical novel *Atomic Family*.

Dean, Nellie, and Wilson Porter are an all-American family living in the suburb of a small American town. The news that the Soviet Union has detonated the most powerful atomic bomb known to humanity shakes Nellie to the core. Dean dismisses her concerns, and scolds her for letting Wilson play with his friends unsupervised and use the family fallout shelter as a playground. Teetering on the edge of depression, Nellie finds solace in her alcohol while Dean withdraws from his wife and child.

Wilson pays close attention to his parents. He knows that it is up to him to stop the Soviets from invading. His playtime in the fallout shelter is prepping for nuclear disaster. His friends are his fellow watchdogs. His binoculars are for scouting for enemy aircraft.

Immersed in their broken dreams, Nellie and Dean take their frustrations out on Wilson and treat him like a nuisance. A tragic accident while Wilson is out on patrol shatters the life they took for granted.

Atomic Family takes place during Halloween in 1961. The brief time period distills the narrative into a sharp portrait of a family unraveling as it succumbs to the paranoia of the Cold War. Nellie's circumscribed life is contrasted to Dean's responsibilities as breadwinner. Compensating for the lack of control at work, Dean takes control of Nellie and tries to rein in Wilson. Nellie and Wilson respond in silent rebellion. The novel's cause and effect are immediate, rushing the story headlong towards its disastrous end.

Atomic Family is a sharp portrait of a family unraveling under the pressure of the paranoia of the Cold War arms race.

ERIKA HARLITZ KERN (January / February 2023)

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