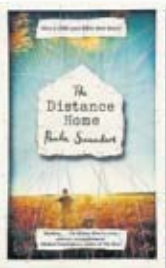


A family dancing towards disaster

Johanna Thomas-Corr admires a heartfelt tale of brutal parental love



The Distance Home

by Paula Saunders

Picador, 304pp; £14.99

Paula Saunders based the heroine of her novel closely on herself. René is a ballet prodigy, head cheerleader, the secretary of the student council, a lead majorette and a ping pong champion. She plays the flute, piano, guitar and oboe. The other kids at her high school in 1960s South Dakota resent her for excelling at too many things. So might Saunders's peers today. She can add wife of a Booker-winning author (George Saunders) and novelist to her list of credentials. A consummate novelist too, it turns out.

Yet the author's home life was mired in psychological — and occasionally physical — warfare, as she reveals in this intimate debut, dedicated to her brother Mark and inspired by her girlhood. It's the story of how the opportunities received or denied in childhood can shape our lives.

Al and Eve are high school sweethearts whose marriage slides into rancour and indignation once they have children. Al, a cattle trader, spends much of his life on the road, leaving Eve to run the home. Both are "born fighters — descendants of people who'd held on for their lives against drought, infestation, disease, and freezing weather". However, Al takes against their firstborn, Leon, a sensitive boy with a talent for ballet that he finds charming

enough in his middle child, René, but which must be beaten out of the son. To cattlemen ballet "meant only one thing: homo, freak, weirdo, faggot, queer, fairy, 'Twinkle Toes'. And coming up against that was like standing in front of a moving wall of water and asking it to turn around."

Al adores René while making Leon the family scapegoat. He is mocked as a "lazy Indian" however hard he tries to please — and ends up so traumatised that he pulls out his hair and eyelashes. Eve remains fiercely loyal to her victimised son and her youngest child, Jayne, seething at René for displacing them in their father's affection. "As far as Eve was concerned, René had been favored, exempted, eager to take whatever she wanted as birthright, no matter the cost to anyone else."

Saunders shows parental love as full of contradictions. When René becomes the target of school bullies, Eve comes out fighting. "They're mean little dopes," she reassures her friendless daughter, "they want to pull you down to their small-town,

know-nothing level." Closer to home, Eve loses her nerve and allows Al to batter Leon. Yet as Leon sinks into addiction and mental illness, the upwardly mobile family move to a large, mock-Tudor townhouse and René learns to thrive on adversity.

The Distance Home is written as fiction rather than memoir because Saunders wanted to try to understand what happened to her brother "from a perspective less tainted by pain and judgement and blame". She dives deep to explore her helplessness, guilt, anger and self-vindication, but she looks outwards too; you can read the novel as a parable of postwar America, where ambition can crush the most vulnerable, but allow the most stoical (and lucky) to soar. She's subtle on gender; it isn't the girl who is denied opportunities by the overbearing father, it's the boy who is brutalised by patriarchal expectations.

Saunders writes about Leon's humiliation with a heartfelt intensity although always at one remove. We see the after-

shocks in René's fraught, but rewarding relationship with Eve, one of the most convincing portraits of a mother-daughter bond that I have read. This isn't a novel rich in incident, but it's generous, humane and it lingers. Saunders knows all about darkness — but she holds on to the light.

