

Kevin Sweeney is the author of *Father Figures: Three Wise Men Who Changed A Life*

**Father Figures:  
Three Wise Men Who Changed a Life**

**By Kevin Sweeney**

An unforgettable story about a boy who loses his father-but is determined to find his way.

"At the age of eight, I began to worry about what I might lack as someone who grew up without a dad... I felt incomplete, and I was afraid that I might always be incomplete...I might fail at something that mattered. I might fail at being a good father. I might fail at being a good man. And so I developed a plan."

When Kevin Sweeney was three years old, his grandma sat him down with his five siblings and told him news that would change his life: his father was dead. In an Irish Catholic family, stoicism in the face of suffering was expected, and over time it seemed the memory of Sweeney's father had been buried with him. No one talked about it, no one cried, and life went on as normally as it could in a cramped house with little income and a lot of mouths to feed. But still, growing up in a neighborhood filled with young boys and their dads, Sweeney couldn't help but wonder: how will I learn to be a father without one?

In this beautifully written and universally touching memoir, *FATHER FIGURES* (May 6th, 2003; ReganBooks,) Sweeney describes a plan-set in motion when he was eight years old-that ultimately helped fill the gaping whole left in his life with his father's passing. He chose three husbands from his mother's tight circle of female friends-all fathers with big families of their own-to be his role models. He wouldn't tell them about their weighty responsibility. He wouldn't ask them for advice. He would simply watch them: how they behaved toward their kids, how they treated their wives, how they worked, spoke, and dressed. He would watch them and, he hoped, he would learn.

*FATHER FIGURES* traces Sweeney's journey to manhood-a life marked by sorrow yet still filled with the innocent wonders and naïve recklessness of youth. He learns to hit curveballs, has run-ins with police, and barely survives the roiling masculinity of a Catholic boys school. He admires the strength and courage of his mother, who somehow manages to teach him that even simple things-like two pieces of salami every Sunday afternoon-can be thrilling. He looks up to his older brother, who passes on the family paper route, the pride that comes from working for something you want, and much more. He makes friends, cracks jokes, and drinks more than he should. And he searches for hints about the life of the father he never knew.

All the while, three men unknowingly ground him and guide him as he moves toward adulthood:

- Jim Gaffney, a successful, reserved businessman and father of seven at teaches him the art of being gracious and polite, the importance of respect and generosity, and the right way to treat a woman

- Chick Kelly, the boisterous father of nine who regularly brought meat from his butcher shop to feed the Sweeney household, taught Sweeney strength and steadiness, set him straight when his drinking in high school threatened his future, and helped him learn to believe in himself

- Sherm Heaney, father of one of Sweeney's closest friends and a constant presence at ball games and school events, imparted the first rule of being a father: always show up.

Even when Sweeney finally learns the tragic secret behind his father's death, he draws strength from these lessons to grieve, to cope, and finally, to heal. Ultimately a book about hope, FATHER FIGURES shows us that tragedy in childhood doesn't have to result in a tragic life, that children can be resilient-even creative-in their grief, and that we can make profound differences in the lives of young people by something as simple but important as a good example.

#### About the Author

Active in politics and the environmental movement, Kevin Sweeney held senior positions in the Clinton Administration, served as press secretary to Senator Gary Hart, and worked as an aide in both houses of Congress. His work has appeared on Salon.com, and in the San Francisco Examiner, Los Angeles Times, and Detroit News. He has appeared on Nightline, NewsHour, and Larry King Live, and has been profiled in People, the Washington Post, San Francisco Chronicle, and Los Angeles Times. He lives in Piedmont, California.

#### Father Figures

Three Wise Men Who Changed a Life

Kevin Sweeney

ReganBooks; Publication Date: May 6th, 2003

\$22.95/Hardcover; 192 pages ; ISBN: 0-06-051192-3