

The Reader's Guide

TO ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

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BY ELIZABETH M. TAMNY

Cheaper by Eleven?

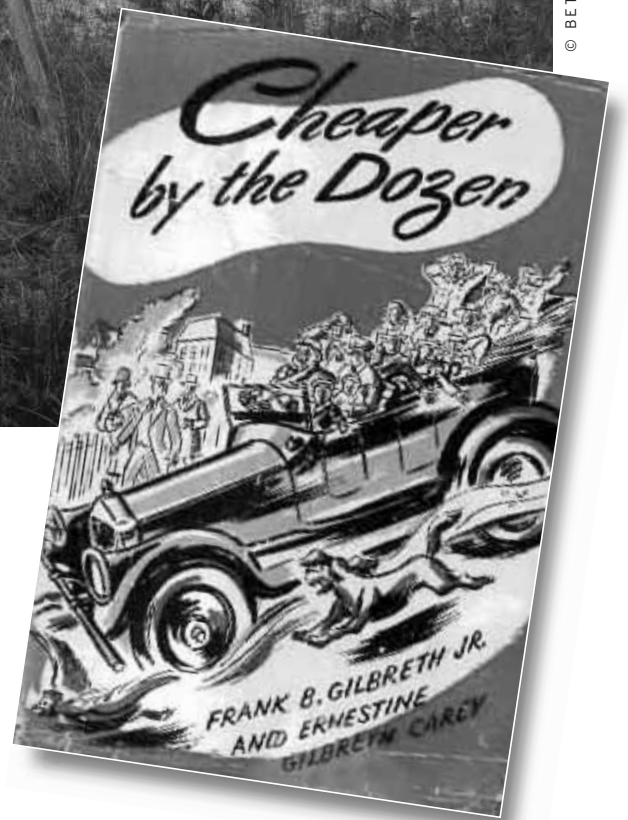
*The beloved classic harbors a mystery,
but only the most attentive
readers ever seem to notice.*



GILBRETH FAMILY, 1923

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hen I was a child I read *Cheaper by the Dozen* the way I read all my favorite books: often. Fifty or sixty times, at least: fast, slow, word by word, huge sloppy gulps, bits and pieces, the whole thing. I abandoned it after college, but the dog-eared paperback eventually crept back into my hands, bringing with it in adult rereadings a familiar, unanswered confusion. First published in 1948 and still in print, *Cheaper by the Dozen* is the true story of motion study experts and industrial management pioneers Frank Bunker Gilbreth (1868-1924) and Lillian Moller Gilbreth



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(1878-1972) and their family of 12 children, six girls and six boys. (A new movie loosely based on the story came out Christmas Day.) As is common with old-fashioned children's classics, it's bracing and cynical as well as affectionate, and full of dry humor. Even as I enjoyed the crisp writing and cozy detail, though, a nagging fact began to beg for attention. It had tickled the back of my brain as a kid—I was aware of it—but I never examined it closely. As an adult, speeding through the book over and over, the truth, and the confusion it brought, arose from the whirring rereadings like an image in a zoetrope, growing stronger as the acceleration increased.

There never were a dozen kids. While the Gilbreths did indeed produce 12 children, according to the plan famously hatched on their honeymoon, the second oldest, Mary, died of diphtheria in 1912 at age six, which means that she died around the time the sixth child, Bill, was born. Which means that there weren't even 12 children, then later 11—there never were a dozen.

Everything in *Cheaper by the Dozen*—the title, the jokes, the dialogue, the set pieces, the commentary, the book jacket blurbs, the cover art (usually), certainly a good portion of readers' sentimental fondness for it—is based on the theme of lots of kids, an even dozen. The following is a typical anecdote from the book, which states on the first page, "There were twelve of us": "I seen [sic] eleven of them, not counting the man and the woman, someone would shout from the sidewalk. 'You missed the second baby up front here, Mister,' Dad would call over his shoulder."

These anecdotes are the raw matter of *Cheaper by the Dozen*, which was written by two of the older Gilbreth children, Frank B. Gilbreth Jr. and Ernestine Gilbreth Carey. The story ends at the time of Frank Sr.'s sudden death at age 55, when Lillian Gilbreth takes over the family business.

The way the Gilbreths' theories of scientific management and time saving sometimes worked and sometimes didn't when applied to large-scale child rearing lend *Cheaper by the Dozen* much of its charm. Pet tactics of Frank Sr.'s such as calling a "Family Council" to discuss important decisions, playing French-language records while

the kids brushed their teeth, or painting Morse code on the walls of their vacation home are treated with an adult's fond but unsentimental eye: sometimes a hassle, sometimes inspired examples of their parents' professional work, sometimes funny in their unintended aftereffects, and sometimes undeniably useful in raising and training a household of so many kids.

Many kids... 11 kids. How do you find this out? There's no mention of Mary's death in the text of *Cheaper by the Dozen*. The book is carefully structured and episodic, moving loosely forward in time even as chap-

Although the book spends most of its time talking about the dozen, it also, a few times, quietly lets the facts of the matter slip through. They seem to occur at moments when the authors can't avoid having to present lists of the children in order, as if they can lie about Mary broadly ("There were twelve of us") but not up close.

ters bounce around chronologically and thus, with a few notable exceptions, avoid the need to list the children's names in order. Different anecdotes describe which children were around when a particular event took place, but when family life is discussed in general there are always a dozen. Only a few ancillary parts of the book directly reveal the truth: an early edition includes a family tree in the appendix that notes Mary, deceased, and a where-are-they-now chapter, but I didn't have that version. The way I found out was from one bald sentence on the second page of the authors' 1950 sequel, *Belles on Their Toes*, the narrative of which is much more linear than *Cheaper by the Dozen*, and less artfully arranged,

making it impossible to knit the story together over the gap where Mary should be.

In the first chapter of *Belles on Their Toes*, the children are lined up to see their mother off on a trip. It's a poignant scene, something they did regularly in *Cheaper by the Dozen* for their father but are now doing as their mother tries to take her husband's place in the professional world, and there's a roll call of the children's names. At that point, rather than working around Mary's absence, the authors acknowledge it in a terse footnote—the only mention of her death in the text of either book. From then on, *Belles* is about the eleven.

But close examination reveals an odd quality to the internal structure of *Cheaper by the Dozen*. Although the book spends most of its time talking about the dozen, it also, a few times, quietly lets the facts of the matter slip

where else in the book, the chapter titled "Have You Seen the Latest Model?" mentions her by name three times. This chapter charts the birth order of the children, naming all 12 Gilbreth kids one by one and describing the circumstances of each of their births. The mentions just sit there without comment. Little red flags.

To see how far the dozen idea went, I checked out the stage and film versions of *Cheaper by the Dozen*, produced quite soon after the book's publication, and discovered that they all push the idea like the book, as does the current remake starring Steve Martin and Bonnie Hunt. The play uses nine children as distinct characters, but implies that there are twelve total, the rest babies upstairs. The musical has ten distinct children and two baby bundles. Neither mention Mary by name.

The most far-out version of the

the book, and as such the ghostly strangeness of this Mary, who says almost nothing and has paler hair than the other children, looms large.

It's impossible not to be curious about the decision to pretend there were 12 children, especially as *Cheaper by the Dozen* was written by two of them. Why discuss their father's death and not their sister's? Why dot the book with a few lurking mentions of Mary? What's the reader to make of the endless "cheaper by the dozen" gags, which are completely misleading while they are technically true, like the dedication: "To Dad / who only reared twelve children / and / To Mother / who reared twelve only children." One of the reasons I ignored the fact that there were 11 as a child was that in some hard-assed kid way I think it offended my sense of symmetry. Were the authors so enamored of the idea of six boys and six girls, too, that they couldn't give it up? Why bother creating an elaborate narrative structure to hide the truth in *Cheaper by the Dozen*, then abandon it in *Belles on Their Toes*? Most of all I wondered: did the father and everyone else make all those jokes in real life? How much of this story was made up? The truth is so cleverly concealed—it barely shows unless you are obsessive enough to plow through the text pasting Post-it notes on significant passages—but once revealed, it creates the kinds of questions that (to quote Barbara Pym) "start a landslide in the mind."

Magazine and newspaper articles offer no new information, but they do confirm the idea that there are two public versions of the Gilbreths out there—the *Cheaper by the Dozen* family (the book technically being a work of historical fiction), with 12 kids, and "the Gilbreths," with 11. Neither versions acknowledges the other, but neither is either hidden.

The articles I found were basically split between the two, with more emphasis on 12 coming after the publication of *Cheaper by the Dozen*, while the first articles, especially those appearing before Frank Gilbreth's death, usually discuss 11. In the 50 years after her husband's death, Lillian Gilbreth came to be written about more than he, and as she was a woman, and a woman of "firsts" in traditionally male worlds, children were mentioned more often. (This was noticeable even in their *Who Was Who* entries: the children are named in hers—including Mary—but not in his.) Gradually, articles start to mention 12 more often than 11, especially after 1948—but not uniformly. One 1935 *Fortune* article stated, "When a female efficiency engineer produces twelve children and pro-

through. You might not notice these little clues unless you were predisposed to finding them. They seem to occur at moments when the authors can't avoid having to present lists of the children in order, as if they can lie about Mary broadly ("There were twelve of us") but not up close. They appear at points where the math doesn't quite add up: "Sometimes," Anne said slowly, "it's hard to be the oldest [girl]. When I think of Ernestine, Martha, Lillian, Jane—they won't have to go through any of this," leaving out Mary, of course, possibly making you wonder where or who the sixth daughter is, as the tidy idea of six boys and six girls is brought up almost as often as that of a dozen. And although Mary doesn't appear any-



duces them intentionally and in equal proportions, six boys and six girls, it can be laid only to genius." But the next year an article by Martha Gilbreth appeared in *Scribner's* discussing her life as "one of eleven children," and in 1948 Lillian Gilbreth was described as the "mother of eleven children" in *Independent Woman*. When *Belles on Their Toes* was excerpted in *Ladies Home Journal* in 1950, as *Cheaper by the Dozen* had been in 1949, the introduction referenced 11 children, not 12. But then the 1987 obituary for the oldest child, Anne, quotes her son Peter as saying, "All 12 led fulfilled lives. . . . They all had, and have, excellent senses of humor, which they got from their father," a comment that's all the odder because by that point Martha had died as well.

None of the articles I've found, with their endlessly wobbling number of kids, discussed Mary or the fact that there were variously reported to be 11 or 12 children in the family, nor is the disparity addressed in Gilbreth biographies and autobiographies. Mary's death is discussed in these books—briefly. In each case it's revealed that her death completely devastated her family. In *Time Out for Happiness*, Frank Jr.'s account of his parents' lives, he wrote, "Neither Frank nor Lillie ever discussed Mary again, at least in the presence of the children. . . . For years thereafter, if one of the younger children asked Mother about Mary, she'd do her best to answer calmly, and then retire hastily to her room, with her shoulders shaking in sobs." Lillian Gilbreth wrote in her 1941 autobiog-

raphy, *As I Remember*, not published until 1998, "Never from that day on could either parent find the relief of speaking freely of the experience."

This certainly would have been common practice for the time; indeed, in Lillian Gilbreth's *Living With Our Children*, first published in 1928, she stated, "Some parents feel that children should know the perils of disease and its devastating effects. But I question the wisdom, especially with a child, of dwelling on disturbing or unpleasant matters." However, she later wrote in *As I Remember* that Mary's death "was an experience an understanding psychologist might possibly have adjusted, but it was not adjusted, and left a permanent scar."

By the time Frank Gilbreth died, over ten years later, the family chose to handle his passing differently, guaranteeing him a different sort of literary immortalization. "Anne pointed out that neither Lillie nor Frank had wanted to mention Mary's name after her death, and instead had kept their grief inside of them, to themselves," wrote Frank Jr. in *Time Out for Happiness*. "Let's not do that about Dad," Anne urged. "Some of the younger children won't remember him, and they won't even know what he was like, if we do that."

Another factor in the decision not to talk about Mary appears to be the blow that her death was to her father's sense that the vagaries of the world were manageable, even conquerable, through the principles of industrial engineering. In the 1949 biography *Frank and Lillian Gilbreth: Partners for Life*, Edna Yost claimed that Frank's

"was not the normal reaction of a man to death, for this death was his first forced admission of failure in a project to which he had given his utmost." Frank, wrote Lillian Gilbreth in *As I Remember*, "insisted on trying his techniques, but it was no use. . . . For the first time in his life [he] faced a situation which he could not master." Dave Ferguson, an engineer who runs the Gilbreth Network Web site, a clearinghouse for information on Frank and Lillian's work that's not formally connected with the family but is run with their approval, says, "You have to understand that the Gilbreths—particularly Frank—did not accept death as a natural course of things." (A constant theme in *Cheaper by the Dozen* is that illness was considered a weakness.)

Mary's death challenged their theories, or the scope of them, but then, as the work went on, had to be put in some kind of context. Lillian Gilbreth wrote of it in a startlingly abstract fashion in *The Quest of the One Best Way: A Sketch of the Life of Frank Bunker Gilbreth*, published soon after Frank's death: "They were determined that failure should teach them to avoid other failures; that lack of success should only serve to help them locate causes of lack of success in their own work or that of their clients, and that every past success, though in a different field, should be transferred into the new field."

But—still—Mary got put back in the story. Recently, Ernestine Gilbreth Carey (*Cheaper by the Dozen* coauthor Frank Gilbreth Jr. died in 2001) answered some basic questions about why in a letter. The denial that confus-

es the book and everything else comes, not surprisingly, from a sort of truth.

"We always thought of ourselves as our parents' 'dozen,'" Carey wrote. "This included Mary."

Ferguson concurs with this: "The family never got over the loss of Mary and continued to refer to the Dozen, even though all twelve were never contemporaries. . . . This out of the family's long sadness over her loss [*Cheaper by the Dozen* was published over 30 years after Mary's death] and their feeling that Mary was still with them, in spirit."

Then things get somewhat complicated. "We didn't need anything to remind us of our deceased little sister," Carey continued, the point being, I guess, that the idea of a dozen wouldn't hurt anyone's feelings because they were already too aware of her absence. "Our brothers and sisters over the years agreed with Frank and me that Mary's loss should not be stressed in our hoped-for light-hearted first book. We have no regrets about this." The family, in particular Carey and her brother Frank, basically chose to hide her in plain sight.

The point here, by the way, is not to meanly spotlight a family tragedy or make Mary "not count"—if the Gilbreths found the inclusion of Mary comforting rather than creepy, who am I to judge?—but rather to tackle some of the sadness one can feel as a reader at the constant rounding up to 12, the lingering curiosity about the spectral 12th child. It scarcely seems possible that, as Dave Ferguson speculates, "It would have been hard to notice one was missing."

In *As I Remember* Lillian Gilbreth wrote that after Mary's death Frank "never could answer the question 'How many children have you?' without stopping to calculate," which seems to sum up the enduring mystery about Mary; not her existence, but how different versions of the truth are allowed, even encouraged, to live alongside each other, even within *Cheaper by the Dozen*. You'd think they would have been piercingly aware that there were 11, not 12, but this certainly matches what seems now to be the case. Mary's death was both a horrible blow and a uniquely papered-over one—for public consumption, in the context of her parents' work, and within the family.

But the Gilbreths, intentionally or not, planted just enough clues for generations of readers to be forever curious about Mary, even if that's the last thing they wanted. In the preface to the most recent HarperPerennial paperback edition of *Cheaper by the Dozen*, Carey ruefully describes the effects of curiosity, a trait vigorously encouraged in the

Gilbreth family, which led to the book, and thus to a lifetime of endless questions from readers. "What a range of queries, personal and professional, now confront me. Here are examples of a few: 'What happened to your sister Mary? After a while, you and your brother forgot to mention her. Why? Did she die, maybe? If she did die, then I want to hear how, please.'" She doesn't provide any answers, though, leaving Mary the missing puzzle piece for which kids will always be scrambling.

The Steve Martin film moves many steps away from the particulars of the Gilbreths' lives. Now the family is "the Bakers," most of the children's names are changed, and the story is transported to modern-day Chicago, where the father is a college football coach, not a motion study expert. Which leaves only the premise: a dozen kids.

Despite this, and the fact that wacky chaos, not time management, seems to be the point of the enterprise, in a lot of ways the remake (which I haven't seen) appears to have much in common with the 1950 film, down to the way the studio is using the kids in the family as a chance to incorporate current teen stars (Tom Welling and Hilary Duff instead of Jeanne Crain and Barbara Bates). This new movie, *Cheaper by the Dozen's* continued popularity, whatever it is that causes the idea of a big family to resonate in our collective psyche: that's the other part of how the "secret" of Mary is perpetuated. (In the immortal words of Homer Simpson, "It takes two to lie. One to lie and one to listen.")

We love the idea of a dozen, are loath to give it up, though I'm still not sure why. Maybe it's the idea that such a very large number of kids seems mutinous, always on the edge of taking over, especially in numbers that can be counted like troops. Or it's the symmetry, or the postwar abundance it spoke to. Maybe it's the excess so many children embody: so many personalities, all those daily needs, and—in the end—so much warmth. Many people love these books as kind of a surrogate family. Maybe they give us a chance to gawk at that many genetic throws of the dice, test our own ideas about nature and nurture—although *Cheaper by the Dozen* is hilariously sanguine about the forced show-pony quality of living in such a family. Which is why I will always find odd their decision to take the 12 idea as big as they did. The crack in the center of the conceit will always throw the book off true just a bit, making some hypnotized child reader wonder in the back of his brain what adults aren't telling him. ■