Frank Bunker Gilbreth Jr., and Ernestine Gilbreth Carey, *Cheaper by the Dozen*

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Frank Bunker Gilbreth's, Jr., and his sister Ernestine Gilbreth Carey's autobiographical childhood memories *Cheaper by the Dozen*, first published in 1948, were an international bestseller of the late 1940s. This book, as well as its follow-up, *Belles on Their Toes* (1950), was immediately translated into many languages. The book brings together a series of loosely connected and not chronologically arranged anecdotes from the Gilbreth family. In the early twentieth century, Frank and Ernestine's parents, Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, developed a method of time and motion studies based on Frederick W. Taylor's *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911) in order to study the working habits of industrial workers and to improve their work efficiency (Gilbreth 1917). They applied the results of their research to their own family of twelve children.

From the vantage point of two of the elder children, Ernestine and Frank, the book humorously recounts how time was saved everywhere in the family's daily life: in the bathroom, the children were made to learn foreign languages from records, they often skipped school grades, and no opportunity was missed to teach them useful things such as Morse code or typewriting. Just like in the Gilbreths' motion studies, processes were broken down into individual sections in order to avoid actions deemed superfluous. The democratic family council discussed problems, voted together and distributed upcoming domestic tasks, occasionally for a fee: the child with the lowest bid got the job. Mother Lillian also used her limited time effectively by correcting the proofs of her latest book while 'resting' after childbirth.

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It gets particularly funny when Dad Frank arranges for both his and his children's tonsils to be removed in a piecework manner and lets the operations be filmed in order to analyze the efficiency. And finally, in a humorous way, a psychologist who has chosen the Gilbreth family as a research subject on the topic of 'family planning' is fooled.

When the father suddenly dies, it becomes clear how well he has prepared his family to function like a well-oiled machine even without him. The sequel describes how Lillian runs the efficiency consulting company on her own and how the children grow up. The comic effects of the book arise from the discrepancy between the democratic and scientifically based family management practiced by the head of the family and the family reality, which also sees the loving and charismatic commander-in-chief occasionally teased and taunted.

The book's German translation, *Im Dutzend billiger*, was first published in 1949. In the first ten years after its publication, 350,000 copies were sold. In the following decades further editions and several licenced editions appeared; even a *Reader's Digest* edition came out. And it did not stop there: *Cheaper by the Dozen* and *Belles on Their Toes* also conquered the cinema. A first film adaptation of the two books was made by Walter Lang in 1950 starring Clifton Webb and Myrna Loy in the leading roles. This very amusing film adaptation sticks closely to the originals, whereas the 2003 remake in slapstick manner directed by Shawn Levy, with Steve Martin and Bonnie Hunt as parents, is only loosely based on the novel and offers such a successful shallow entertainment that a sequel was released in 2005. And the story of the film adaptations continues: A new Disney production of *Cheaper by the Dozen* is planned for 2022.

Not only the motif of the large family made it into the cinema, the topic of researching and rationalizing household activities is still relevant to the present day. For example, the 2003 Norwegian film *Kitchen Stories* directed by Bent Hamer makes fun of cultural anthropological techniques as carried out in the 1950s in studies of bachelors' kitchen practices. A team of Swedish researchers invades a Norwegian village, and the researchers establish themselves on raised hides in the kitchen of the test subjects in order to observe their daily routines in view of optimizing them. Isak, however, refuses to cooperate with the field researcher Folke, sabotaging the investigation, which is supposed to take place in a form of distant observation, by mostly cooking in the bedroom, making Folke record absurd behaviors, 'torturing' him (who is not allowed to leave his high seat) with the monotonous sound of a dripping tap, and finally even turns the tables by observing Folke himself through a hole in the ceiling. In the end, the two protagonists of the film, which is kept in delicate green-gray tones, break the rules to become friends.

Research methods and results of such pioneers as the two Gilbreths still determines our everyday life today. One example is the forerunner of our modern kitchen equipment. The Frankfurt kitchen, a milestone in domestic architecture, is also based on the ideas of Taylorism. The idea of optimizing work with industrial mass production was transferred to residential construction, where the kitchen

workstation was designed according to ergonomic and practical considerations. On the one hand, the trend to 'rationalize' the household was reinforced by the intention to reduce the time spent in (in terms of economy) unproductive housework, so that women would have more time to work in the factories. On the other hand, emancipatory efforts to improve the status of women, also in the home, called for justification to relieve women of their daily chores and enable them to pursue other interests.

"Readings" that "mattered"? That is a complex question, because for me as a literary scholar, of course, several books have determined my life. Choosing a particular book was a real challenge for me as someone who reads a lot and who is connected to the printed word every day through her job and her passions. Undoubtedly my choice had to be very personal, so the best way was a spontaneous and intuitive choice. It fell straight on *Cheaper by the Dozen*. It is a strange coincidence that the invitation to participate in this Unfestschrift occurred at a moment when I was already reflecting on this topic and had even been making lists of the books which have been particularly important to me: my 'books of life.'

I remember exactly how my mother slipped me the nicely bound volume of *Cheaper by the Dozen*. For me, this book was the transition to other books in the adult world, and it delighted me from the very first line. I probably read more between the ages of ten and twelve than I do today. I read everything I found. After I was 'done' with the usual children's and young adult's books, my mother was able to suggest further readings (my father was interested in archeology and history—subjects that I was not too enthusiastic about). My mother was also a bookworm before her duties as a working mother of three left her with little time for her reading passion. There was a bookshelf in my childhood room filled with her crime novels which I turned to later, and another one with my mother's other books in the hallway. It happened that novels, probably because of their partly erotic content, were considered inappropriate—this problem could easily be solved by swapping the book covers... But that was later, and even further on in my life I discovered the collections of the Goslar library.

Throughout my life I have often returned to *Cheaper by the Dozen* for various reasons. Of course, I wanted to get my daughter excited about this novel, so I read it to her. In fact, I am convinced that the book is to 'blame' for some of my quirks. Time and again, while working in the kitchen, I find myself checking the stages and processes to see whether the sequence of actions make sense. Did I open the cupboard door twice to take out something that could have been done in one go? When I catch myself doing so, I smile at myself and also think fondly of my mother.

In addition, *Cheaper by the Dozen* fascinates me since so many years because I found out more and more about the novel. The great success of the Gilbreths' family stories is due to the description of intact family structures during the unstable period after WW II, when new forms of family life had to be found as the fathers returned from the war, as mothers were increasingly successful in their professional

life, and the family as an institution became the subject of scientific analyses and experiments.

Works Cited

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