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## Cameron Douglas and the painful price paid by sons living in the shadow of a famous father

From David Bowie's son, who rejected his name, to Cameron Douglas, offspring of Michael Douglas, who was jailed for drug dealing last week, the children of stars clearly struggle to forge their own identity



**Paul Harris**  
The Observer, Sunday 25 April 2010



Michael, Kirk and Cameron Douglas in 2003. Photograph: Allstar/MGM/Sportsphoto Ltd./Allstar

Like any father witnessing the jailing of his son, Michael Douglas looked grim and ashen-faced last week in Manhattan.

Sitting in the courtroom in which his son, actor and DJ Cameron Douglas, was awaiting sentencing for dealing drugs, the Hollywood star listened to Judge Richard Berman pronouncing a harsh judgment. "Get beyond and get over that idea ... that Cameron Douglas is a victim," Berman said.

Yet that was the argument that the Douglas clan – Michael, grandfather Kirk and Cameron's mother, Diandra – had put forward in letters explaining Douglas's problems in terms of his dysfunctional childhood. Cameron, it was claimed, was suffering the fallout from an age-old struggle: the battle of the son growing up with a powerful, successful, famous father.

"I have some idea of the pressure of finding your own identity with a famous father. I'm not sure I can comprehend it with two generations to deal with," Michael Douglas wrote in a letter asking for leniency and referring to his own screen legend father.

Diandra Douglas was even more blunt. "Being Michael's son and [Kirk Douglas's](#) grandson was an incredible cross for him to bear. My son felt defeated before he could even get out of the gate," she wrote in her letter.

Judge Berman, in the end, was sympathetic... up to a point. Douglas's crime would normally bring him a 10-year sentence. Instead he got five, plus a hefty fine and a lengthy period of community service. Being the son of a celebrity father, it seems, can now be seen as mitigating circumstances in a court of law.

The case did offer a fascinating view into the complexities of the father-son relationship when it plays out in the public eye. From Martin Amis's difficult relationship with his father, Kingsley, to the struggles of the two George Bushes, it has been a source of great art, great drama and, perhaps, even the cause of wars. The addition of fame to an already complex relationship has led to the private dramas that beset every family being played out for all to see.

Kingsley Amis referred to his son, Martin, as a "little shit" in response to the latter earning a handsome amount of money in 1978. "He's bright but a fucking fool," Kingsley remarked later, of some of his son's political opinions. Such details emerged in Martin Amis's memoir, *Experience*, which contained many anecdotes about the relationship between the two high-profile authors. It was, to say the least, a difficult relationship.

This is hardly uncommon for those who inhabit the public realm – and the issues play both ways. Fathers can be just as distressed by their sons' success. They may see it as a harbinger of their own mortality or the arrival of a younger rival. "A father may be envious of their child. They think the child has a silver spoon while they had to tough it out and achieve success," said psychologist Dr Leslie Seppinni.

Despite the obvious and potentially invidious comparisons in store, the sons of famous fathers often take up the same careers. There is the Bush family, or even Al Gore, who became a Tennessee senator just like his dad. Or Martin Sheen and his sons Charlie Sheen and Emilio Estevez. Or Jakob Dylan and Sean Lennon, the sons of two of the most famous and beloved singers of all time, Bob Dylan and John Lennon. They have the weight of unrealistic expectations. A successful celebrity father is a hard act to live up to and any failures – as Cameron Douglas found – will be lived in the media glare.

"There has to be a sense that they often cannot measure up. When you open a paper and see a full-page advert for your father's latest movie, it is going to be hard," said Dr David Sack, a psychiatrist and chief executive of the Promises Treatment Centre. A high-profile father, whatever the field, is bound to cast a long shadow over a son's development. Even when a son does seemingly match the achievements of a father – as Martin Amis did – then it can still be a difficult thing to cope with.

George Bush Jr became a two-term president, unlike his father. Yet all the writings about the two men's father-son relationship still portray the younger Bush as constantly trying to live up to his father's life and expectations of him (and feeling as if he failed). In Oliver Stone's movie *W*, it is suggested that part of the reason for the invasion of Iraq was Bush's desire to finish the job that his father had been unable to complete in the first Gulf war, and finally win his respect.

Other children take the opposite route, rebelling against their fathers and seeking to achieve success elsewhere. Again, the key process is one of creating an identity, but this time in opposition to the father figure rather than trying to mould oneself from the same clay.

Ronald Reagan Jr, the son of the Republican president who played a major part in hastening the fall of Soviet communism, is a noted liberal commentator in America. Jim Morrison, the Doors singer, was the son of Admiral George Stephen Morrison. Morrison senior was the head of American naval forces during the Gulf of Tonkin incident, which led to US involvement in the Vietnam war. His son, however, became a global rock star

and sex symbol of the counter-culture which opposed that war. They did not speak much.

The search for a son's own sense of self, away from the shadow of a famous father, can sometimes involve a very literal change of identity. David Bowie's son, named Zowie Bowie, rejected the unusual rock-star moniker given to him by his parents when he was still a child. From the age of 12 Zowie decided he would rather be known as "Joey". Now he is called Duncan Jones and, rather than follow his father into music, he has become a successful film director.

Such tensions have provided the inspiration for works including *Hamlet* and Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. Experts in the field discuss the guilt that sons feel when they become more successful than their fathers, likening it to a symbolic slaying. Or they speak of the desperate need for a son to get the affirmation of their achievements from their father, without which they will remain meaningless, no matter how great they are. In more common parlance, it is good to have your father feeling proud of you: a trope that is one of the most common themes in high literature and popular culture alike.

That appears to be what Cameron Douglas was after. "Cameron ... idolised his father and did not want to be apart from him," wrote Diandra Douglas, even as she described her husband as an absent father. It was a point that Michael Douglas admitted in his own letter to the judge begging for leniency for his son. He said Cameron had fallen in with a bad crowd, hinting, perhaps unconsciously, that he was simply looking for the father figure that he had not provided. "Cameron found his family in the gang mentality," Michael Douglas wrote.

Sack was not surprised that eventually the younger Douglas fell prey to drug addiction. "Having a celebrity father puts them at risk," said Sack.

The study of the psychology of fathering is not a high-profile subject area, but many experts believe it is becoming increasingly in demand owing to high divorce rates and many sons growing up without fathers. Studies have shown that 34% of American children grow up without their fathers in the home. That rises to a staggering 65% of black children. It is something that profoundly affected Barack Obama, who wrote a book detailing his emotional quest to reach out to his father and has made helping to repair the black traditional nuclear family one of the aims of his presidency.

That just goes to show that the experiences of a complex father-son relationship is one thing that binds celebrities to ordinary people. Every son's father has a profound impact on his life, and vice versa. Every son either rejects or follows his father in forging his own identity and then succeeds or fails at the task.

"We are aware of the famous; but, in fact, less distinguished people like you and I are experiencing the same dynamics," said Professor Michael Lamb, a psychologist at Cambridge University.

The only real difference is that, with celebrities, the dramas play out for all to see, as Cameron Douglas has found.

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## PATERNAL RIVALRY

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**Kingsley Amis on Martin:** "Did I tell you Martin is spending a year abroad as a tax exile? Last year he earned £38,000. Little shit. Twenty-nine, he is. Little shit."

**Martin Amis on Kingsley:** "Kingsley has written often and poignantly about that moment when getting drunk suddenly turns into being drunk, and he is, of course, the laureate of the hangover."

**Kirk Douglas on Michael:** "If I'd known what a big shot Michael was going to be, I'd have been nicer to him when he was a kid."

**Michael Douglas on Kirk:** "Hardly any second-generation people have succeeded. It's a minefield of disasters, of broken careers and self-destruction out there."

**David Bowie on Duncan Jones:** "Zowie Bowie was just too good to resist! He can always change it"

**Duncan Jones on David Bowie:** "I think if you're young and you're being compared with a successful family member, it's really hard to maintain any sense of self-worth and credibility."

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